

BOOK 1: IN THE NETHER AFTER SERIES

Nether After

JODI L. COX

NETHER AFTER

THE NETHER AFTER SERIES
BOOK ONE

JODI LYNNE COX

SPIRIT GATE STUDIO

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my loving husband and my great editor. It also would not have been possible without all the great advice from authors in my writing group who have nudged me forward along the way.

CONTENTS

1. The Tea House's Secrets
2. Whispers of the Other Realm
3. Into the Abyss
4. Welcome To Ris Norsing
5. Two Leiche Guards
6. Recovery
7. Boneyard
8. The Empty Coffin
9. Zeppelin One
10. Dog Fight
11. Dead in the Sky
12. Unsettling Truce
13. Cattle
14. Wei Providence
15. The Mysterious Doctor Wu
16. Unearthed
17. Hungry Ghosts
18. The Clock Tower
19. Reincarnation
20. Rebirth

A Word From The Author
About the Author

CHAPTER I

THE TEA HOUSE'S SECRETS

No matter which way I turn the pic, there isn't a ghost in sight. No orbs, no creepy shadows, not even a hint of ectoplasm. It's just a regular old snapshot frozen in time.

Right smack in the middle of the photo, there's this hospital gurney hogging all the attention. The bed has these plain white sheets. The only thing out of place in the picture is the restraints dangling from the bed rails. Something ugly curls inside me when I look at those twisted leather straps. A shiver chases down my spine. A mix of frustration and sadness overwhelms me. Echoes of past horrors are etched into those worn-out straps, and I can't tear my eyes away.

When was it that Mom got strapped to a bed? I struggle to remember, like trying to piece together a broken memory. All I can remember is her screeching as they wheeled her away.

If only I'd known those were our last moments together. I would've done anything to protect her.

I can't help but hate those authorities who forced her into that straitjacket, the robed dudes from the loony bin. Sometimes I even imagine setting their robes on fire or cursing the life out of them. It reminds me how powerless I was, standing there frozen, clinging to my sister Geraldine's skirt like a helpless kid.

I grip the chopsticks, feeling the wood crack under my grip. I drown the dim sum on my plate in soy sauce and chili oil, trying to cover up the chaos in my head.

Useless memories swirl around, threatening to overwhelm me.

I shake my head hard, hoping to shake 'em loose, and my hair

comes undone. A thousand tiny braids fall over my shoulders, and I quickly gather them up, tying them back in a ponytail without a mirror.

Appearance matters to someone like my old man, the Thaedi aristocracy. We have to keep up appearances, even if it's lame. Every morning, I'm forced into a dark suit and tie, nails trimmed to perfection, and clothes all pressed. Socks gotta match, and shoes have to shine like mirrors. I come out of the bathroom looking like a teenage banker. Well, except for the fact I'm a fifteen-year-old Asian kid who still loves comics.

Magic stirs inside me, growling with anger at the thought of my old man and his suffocating demands. Without realizing it, I roll the photograph of the hospital gurney between my fingers, burning the image into my brain.

I can't afford to dwell on frustrations.

I need to focus on my main duty of guiding ghosts to the netherworld. I need to clear my mind of all these pointless distractions trying to mess me up.

This photo is not my mom's gurney or that stinking piss-scented room she was trapped in. It's a regular hospital room, metal, and rivets, like one of those old folks' homes in the slums. If I don't do something, it will be infested with a restless spirit. That's the big problem I'm dealing with, a responsibility I don't feel like carrying right now.

I don't feel like hunting down ghosts.

I don't feel like doing much of anything except cramming pork bun after pork bun into my mouth.

The red lanterns glow in the busy tea house, making the room cozy. The air carries the scents of tea and tasty dim sum, and a faint shimmer of energy dances around, visible only to me. The chairs around me are filled with shades and spirits of all ages, sipping jasmine tea, laughing, and having a good time. They mumble and whisper, their voices mixing with the clatter of chopsticks and sizzling woks.

Memories of my mom turn into this restless ghost, clawing at the corners of my mind. I hear whispers of her voice as people pass by, catching a whiff of her presence. It makes me wonder if she felt this when she started losing touch with reality.

I hide behind the menu, shielding myself from the envy gnawing at me.

Life would've been so much simpler if my mom had become a ghost. But that's not our fate as charon necromancers. We are forever cursed to be the ferrymen of the dead.

Ghosts deserve happiness, free from the burdens of the living. In the netherworld, they can live at their own pace, with no time limits. These spirits in the tea room will move on and find peace in eternal rest. Meanwhile, I'll still be here, gathering more necromantic energy for my old man. If I disappeared like Mom, no one would come looking for me.

I try to suppress the magic coursing through my arms, telling it to calm down. But my dark mood only makes it restless, like it's begging to be unleashed. I gulp down my jasmine tea. I can't stand the floral taste. It's too overpowering, assaulting my senses. But I tolerate it 'cause Wang's Dim Sum is the bomb.

Usually, I could sit here for hours, watching ghosts undisturbed. This diner reminds me why I became a necromancer in the first place.

I take a few deep breaths, shifting my focus to the spirits around me. They wander about, looking carefree, like regular folks. Watching them gives me purpose and a glimpse of hope on a good day.

Even in a diner full of ghosts today, I still feel like an outsider.

I slam the pic down on the table next to my bamboo steamers, frustration all over my face.

What should I do now?

My thoughts are scattered, and my mind is all over the place. I should focus on my next soul harvest, teleporting to the right spot. But I keep drifting back to my mom, wondering where she is.

Daydreaming and magic spells don't mix well.

One wrong move and I could lose a hand or something even worse.

My necromancy is brutal, capable of causing major chaos if I mess up. That's why the High Council of Necromancers sends us these photos. They anchor our magic, making sure we teleport safely.

In my current state, I'd probably teleport right into the wall of some abandoned nut house. I can picture it, stuck in the wall with only my upper body sticking out like some weird carnival attraction. People would pay to take pics with me. But I ain't ready to join the dead and useless, not when I haven't even kissed a girl or felt a boob yet.

My imagination mocks me as I reach for the photo, wondering if there's a way to save my mom from eternal torment.

"No more distractions," I mutter, steeling myself for what needs to be done.

I take a deep breath, pushing my emotions aside, and grab the chopsticks with purpose. The ghosts can wait—they've waited long enough. Today, I'll do my duty, harvest those restless souls, and guide 'em to the peace they deserve.

The salty and spicy flavors explode in my mouth as I finish the last piece of dim sum.

The spirit I'm supposed to drain of necromancy has probably turned into something nasty by now.

Although my time here in the tea house wasn't a total waste, I rummaged through the scattered magic supplies on the table. Shide papers with various spells lie strewn among my plates and dim sum baskets, their intricate inscriptions catching the red lantern light. More of them wait in my backpack, hidden beneath the table. I can almost fold the long, lightning-shaped origami pieces with my eyes closed. The gesture itself is simple—folding the paper at precise angles, visualizing the spell as I do so.

But the spells can be tricky.

Some summon shields for protection, and others reveal hidden truths. And then there are spells designed to manipulate the necromantic energy that binds spirits to this realm.

I glance at the photo again, the edges worn and frayed.

The hospital bed in the frame seems colder and more ominous now like the spirits of its past occupants have seeped into the image. It's a reminder of the work that lies ahead, a call I can't ignore. I notice a faint reflection on the glossy surface as I look closer. A shadowy figure hovers behind the gurney, indistinct but undeniably present. My heart skips a beat, and a chill runs down my spine. This is no ordinary haunting. It's something more, something that demands my attention.

I set my chopsticks down, the dim sum half-eaten, and stare at the photograph, my mind racing with questions and possibilities. How did this figure appear? What does it mean? And most importantly, how can I unravel the mysteries hidden within this photo and bring peace to those trapped in its haunting depths?

Violence. Yes, violence is always the answer to evil specters. A good old-fashioned beat down would improve my mood drastically.

Sensing my wicked intentions, Mrs. Wang, the tea room owner, materializes in front of me with a throaty click. Her tea cart rattles and thumps as she wheels it towards my table, laden with steamer baskets filled with mouth-watering Dim Sum delicacies. Pots of fragrant tea, swirling with steam, rest atop the cart, promising a comforting brew.

"Yo, Faust, you need more pork buns, or are you down for some other Dim Sum?"

She was halfway across the room at one moment, and the next moment her chubby figure spawns at the table.

Wang looks at me with empty eye sockets. Her gaze has a mischievous curiosity to it. Mrs. Wang is a timeless presence in this tea house and has dedicated her life to the art of crafting dumplings, evident in the bones that protrude from her plump digits. Her hands, weathered from years of dumpling-making, bear

the marks of her labor, with skin worn away and replaced by the evidence of her culinary artistry.

Nevertheless, she continues to fuss over my tea, expertly replacing the cup with a fresh pot that emits tendrils of steam from its spout.

"You ain't answering me. What's up? Planning a coup d'etat to take over the Nether After?"

Mrs. Wang's grin widens, her toothy expression revealing a set of sharp fangs.

"I got a lot on my mind, Mrs. Wang. Can you send a delivery boy to take the rest of these pork buns to my little sister? I worry about her being alone all day,"

"I'll personally check in on your baby, sis. I'll whip up some fresh, mouth-watering dim sum, not these day-old buns I serve you and the rest of you soul-suckers," she responds with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

I grin at her remark, but my smile fails to reach my eyes.

Despite her tendency to label me an evil necromancer or heartless charon boy, Mrs. Wang still looks out for me and gladly accepts my money.

"Yo, your eyes ain't glowing like jack-o-lanterns. You feelin' sick?" Her taloned hand brushes against my forehead, leaving a slimy, gooey sensation behind. It used to scare me when I was younger, but now I resist the urge to swat her bony hand away.



"Cut it out. I ain't sick," I reply, a touch too brusquely.

I mentally scold myself, realizing that being rude to most people is one thing, but being impolite to Mrs. Wang is completely unacceptable.

"I'm missing some key info in my dossier. I can't figure out how to transfer to the human world. I'm not trying to take it out on you," I explain, my tone filled with apologetic undertones.

"Liar, liar. You're sick 'cause you feel guilty 'bout stealing necromancy from those spooklings. If you didn't hunt ghosts so much, you wouldn't be so cranky all the time," Mrs. Wang accuses, her conviction resonating in her voice.

I nearly choke on my jasmine tea, caught off guard by her words. 'Spookling' is ghost slang for an unhinged soul, conjuring

images of a chubby ghost toddler shuffling around with a pacifier. But in truth, spooklings are no sweet little ghost babies; they're wild spirits that terrorize the living, and as a necromancer, it's my duty to stop them. The longer they roam in the human world, the more dangerous they become. Contrary to Mrs. Wang's belief, I don't feel remorse for taking a bit of necromancy from the ghosts who try to kill me. The spirits trapped here in the netherworld don't comprehend that side of reality.

Mrs. Wang's lips pucker, and she places another basket of dim sum in front of me. "Eat up, bean pole, or no dinner for you and your baby sis tonight."

To appease her, I shove another steaming pork bun, slathered in sriracha, into my mouth and hand her the photograph. Perhaps a ghost's perspective is what I need.

"Anything in this photo catches your attention besides the ominous shadow behind the gurney?"

She leans her ghostly figure closer to the image, despite lacking eyeballs in her sockets. Mrs. Wang scrunches her long, pointy nose in concentration.

"How are you supposed to find the spooklings with this? It's just a photo of an old bed. Why'd they give you this garbage?"

I can't help but smirk, providing her with the textbook answer they taught us.

"The Eternal Court only provides necromancers with a photo containing coordinates, time, and place. After that, we're on our own. They don't want to bind us with rules, supposedly."

"That's dumb," Mrs. Wang snaps, shaking the photo in front of my face with her skeletal hand. "If there's one place the charon government should implement rules, it's this. What if you necromancers get too rough with the spooklings? What if you accidentally destroy one, and they can't be reborn in the netherworld?"

I wince at her outburst, unable to provide an answer. I can't disclose that the government doesn't care whether we harm the

ghosts. I don't want her to lump me in with those types of necromancers. I don't need to say anything.

Mrs. Wang senses my hesitation to speak and huffs loudly, radiating an aura of contempt. Even without my necrotic empathy, I can feel her anger seeping into my thoughts. She's beyond pissed off; she's downright furious. Her tirade continues.

"Stupid Eternal Court, stupid charon government. They think we ghosts have no feelings that we ain't even human anymore," she rants, slamming the photograph next to my dim sum baskets.

"What's that word you, charon, use? The one for the number of spooklings you gotta catch?"

"You mean the spirit quota?" I ask, knowing where she's heading with this.

"Yeah, quota. Aiya, we're just numbers to those charon folks. It isn't right. Wonder why I hate charon? That's why," she concludes, her frustration evident. Suddenly, there is a loud crash from the back of the kitchen area. Mrs. Wang and her cart vanish into thin air, leaving only her echoing voice in my mind, now resembling nails on a chalkboard.

"Figure out how to stop those spooklings, but don't become like those other charon. Be gentler, Faust. The spooklings, they don't all realize they're dead."

"If they knew, I'd be out of a job," I mutter under my breath.

I expect Mrs. Wang to come out and thump me one, but she doesn't. Her screechy voice still echoes in my thoughts even though she's not speaking to me anymore.

It's ironic, you know? If the ghosts in the human world realized that being among the living would bring them misery and madness, they would flock down here like lost souls. Those trapped topside can't make that distinction. They fear death, despite having already passed away. In truth, they have nothing to fear. Nothing but necromancy can harm a spirit.

As I pack away the photo and my necromancy supplies, I notice a smear of yellow out of the corner of my eye. Somehow, in all my

brooding over the photograph, I didn't even see the wilting yellow daffodils on the radiator. They have been sitting on a ledge behind the hospital gurney all along. The realization hits me in the gut. I've been so absorbed with the leather restraints on the gurney that I didn't even notice these dumb flowers would make an excellent anchor for my necromancy.

I tell myself, "Hey, I'm a guy, and I'm not interested in prissy flowers anyway." That probably played a part.

I rummage through my shide collection, pocketing a few paper spells for soul harvesting. Gotta have them on hand just in case my little poltergeist has already transformed into a fierce spirit. Satisfied with my preparations, I shoulder my backpack and let the magic flow through my veins.

Necromancy washes over me in waves. It feels like walking through wet spider webs. Nothing touches me physically, yet I nervously check my grey linen slacks to ensure no spiders crawled inside. Death magic creeps from my arms and chest, surrounding me like an unmovable coffin. I take a deep breath, shut my eyes tight, and let it settle over me like the embrace of damp earth on a tombstone.

I no longer stand in the restaurant when I open my eyes again.

Instead, I stand beside a tin can filled with withered yellow daffodils. My hand clenches the radiator from the photograph. Heat seeps into my skin, and I jerk my palm away too late. My fingers and thumb blister from the burn. A few four-letter words try to escape my mouth, but I can't utter a sound. I can't let my mark know I'm here.

My tongue stings from biting off my yell, but I have work to do.

I scan the area for ectoplasm and signs of spirit activity, but there's nothing here. Inside, the air is heavy with dust and decay. A faint scent of medicinal herbs lingers, mingling with the musty odor of abandonment. Rain and dim light pour through the cracked windows, casting eerie patterns on the peeling wallpaper covering the metal riveted walls. I feel a presence, a lingering energy that

permeates the space. As I move deeper into the room, my senses sharpen. Whispers and faint cries echo through the hallways, and my breath catches in my throat.

The room is a ghostly reflection of the photograph, with the same hospital gurney at its center. But now, there are pans of water scattered on the floor, and the gurney isn't empty anymore.

A long, hard sigh escapes my lips. Water's pouring through the damaged roof. It's cold and damp in here. Someone left this poor, abandoned woman struggling to sit up in a hospital bed. The leathery old thing fights the restraints buckled tight across her frail frame. It's a pathetic sight.

Sickness churns my stomach. Mrs. Wang is right. I'm already feeling guilty because I'm here to steal the magic out of this woman's soul as she dies. My skin prickles over with gooseflesh, telling me her death is imminent. I hide my face in the dossier, double-checking her information.

I'm certain it's her, all the same; I want to make sense of why she's been left alone to die. I read the woman's name for the second time, trying to find answers not in her dossier.

Flossie Hammersmith, age sixty-two, lies on the bed before me. Flossie's spirit will leave her body in five minutes and twenty-two seconds and become a vicious poltergeist. According to the information, Flossie is dying of a toxic breathing disorder the locals call Acid Rain Poisoning Syndrome.

What the heck?

The humans blame the disease on the rain, yet they'd left a little old lady to die in a room with a leaky roof. I claw at my belly, trying to settle my stomach. The pork buns churn away in my insides; I'm beginning to think I shouldn't have eaten so many.

At this moment, I don't blame her spirit. I watch as the older woman strains against her restraints, her eyes fixed on me. There's anger in them, a fiery rage that blazes from within. It's enough to make anyone feel unwelcome, but I have a job to do.

The old woman's head cocks to the side as she realizes she's not

alone.

"Don't be frightened; I'm here to help."

My hand goes up to my mouth as soon as the words escape my lips. How could I be so stupid? Rule number six for all necromancers: never be observed by humans. If someone else heard me, I could be discovered. Humans are never to learn that ghosts and charon exist. It could endanger everything we've built as a society. As it stands, only Flossie has seen me. Still, it's a mistake I should never have made.

I offer the woman a smile and push my way to the foot of her bed. My magic melds with the shadows, spreading through the room like tendrils.

Flossie's eyes, one blue and one green look up at me in fear.

I recognize that fear—the fear of being abandoned, left to die alone. It's the same fear I see in every set of human eyes that cross my path. The fear that haunts me when I lay my head down at night.

"I'm not here to harm you," I say softly.

Flossie's voice cracks. "I want my family. I want to see them again."

I stare at her for a moment. The magic in the room thickens as I work through my thoughts. "What if I told you there was a way to see your family again? A way to reunite with them, even after death?"

Without hesitating, I place my soul gather shide paper on Flossie's chest. She stares at me with unblinking eyes. I take a step closer, the creaking floorboard beneath me drowning out the sound of rain. "Flossie," I say softly, trying to project sympathy in my voice. "I'm here to help you find peace, to reunite you with your family, even in the realm beyond."

Flossie's gaze pierces through me, her anger unwavering. "You think I want your help? You think I want to be stuck in this place?" Her voice, though weak, is laced with bitterness.

"You're just another charlatan preying on the old. Get out of

here.”

Her anger crashes over me like a tidal wave, leaving me gasping for breath. I'm hit with the sensation of boils bursting through my skin and sickly goo sliding down my chest. It feels like leather cuffs snap around my wrists and ankles. My lungs seize, deprived of air, as though invisible hands tighten around my throat. The room spins, and darkness edges into my vision.

I can't breathe.

CHAPTER 2

WHISPERS OF THE OTHER REALM

I gasp, my body desperate for air as I fight against the invisible grip tightening around my throat. Panic surges through me, but I must keep my composure. I tap into my magic, focusing my thoughts and channeling my energy to push back against the oppressive force.

I retrieve one of my shide lightning streamers from my pocket, its origami spell already activated. With a surge of necromantic energy, a shock wave ripples through the room, shattering the suffocating hold on me. Gasping for precious air, sweat trickles down my forehead as I regain my footing, determined to press on.

Flossie's eyes widen with a mix of surprise and defiance, her disbelief evident. I gather my determination, stepping closer to her, my hand gently touching hers.

"Flossie, listen to me. I know you're overwhelmed and terrified, but there's a way to find peace. I can help you reunite with your family, even in the realm beyond. You don't have to remain trapped here."

Her gaze flickers with uncertainty, and a heavy silence descends as Flossie contemplates my words. I hold my breath, hoping that reason will prevail, and she will accept the offer of release and redemption. The curse of necrotic empathy courses through me, amplifying every emotion she projects. I scratch at imaginary boils, trying to shake off the unsettling sensations crawling under my skin.

Flossie remains silent, her blue and green eyes piercing through me. The rattling in her chest grows deeper, making it increasingly difficult for her to breathe. I thump my chest with a clenched fist,

desperate to suppress the rising coughs that threaten to escape.

Death's taste lingers in the air.

"Release..." Flossie croaks, her voice a gurgling mix of blood and desperation.

Is she seeking release from the restraints or from life itself? Regardless, I grant her wish. I tightly grip a fresh soul-harvesting shide by placing my hand over her chest. Necromantic energy oozes down my arm, causing my fingertips to tingle with a slimy wetness. Magic flows from me into the shide, and instantly, the paper streamer begins to glow. The Xenobian symbols I inscribed on it shift from black to orange, absorbing my power.

Flossie fights back with all her strength. The tenement shakes like an earthquake, the metal walls threatening to burst apart. The bed rattles violently, and water pans on the floor slosh and spill their contents. The footsteps echo from above me, the commotion drawing attention.

Flossie expends her last ounce of strength with a primal cry for release, and I pour my necromancy into the paper. It greedily absorbs her death, preserving it within the spell's magic.

For a moment, I'm engulfed in the heavy presence of death.

Death is ugly. Its stench, the pain, and the fear of the unknown all intertwined into a revolting concoction of death magic. It presses against my skin, weighing me down like a tank. I yearn for peaceful passings, but soul harvesting rarely offers such respite.

As Flossie's soul tears away from her body with a resounding pop, her chained hand clutches at her chest, desperately clawing at her heart or lungs. Confusion clouds her gaze as she looks down at her corpse. Suddenly, she jerks her head around and glares at me.



"You... you did something to me. I can't feel my legs."

In Flossie's eyes, I'm the intruder.

She doesn't comprehend what is happening. Unease swirls around her, poking and prodding at her limbs. The magic attempts to twist her into something grotesque and terrifying. Her ghostly form contorts in unnatural ways.

In an instant, Flossie lunges at me, her ghostly figure morphing into a menacing visage. Reacting swiftly, I dodge to the side, narrowly evading her attack. The air crackles with her vengeful energy as she swings wildly, her claws slicing through the space where I once stood.

Regaining my footing, adrenaline courses through my veins, refusing to let her overpower me. With a swift motion, I conjure a shield of shimmering ethereal energy, blocking her next strike. Sparks fly as her spectral claws clash against the barrier. Her fury is in each movement.

Seizing the momentary distraction, I counter-attack, summoning my magic. Shadows swirl around me, tendrils of darkness extending to bind Flossie. They coil around her, constricting her movements, but she fights back with unearthly strength.

Her eyes blaze with an otherworldly fire as she breaks free from the grip of shadows. She lunges at me again in a blur of motion, her sharp nails aimed at my throat. I sidestep, narrowly evading her attack, but her swiftness catches me off guard.

A surge of cold energy slams into my side, knocking the wind out of me.

I grit my teeth, refusing to let the pain weaken my resolve.

Pulling out another shide with an explosive spell, I retaliate with a blast of necrotic power. A concentrated beam of darkness crashes into Flossie, propelling her across the room. She crashes into a crumbling wall, dust and debris scattering in the aftermath. Yet, Flossie refuses to stay down.

She rises with an eerie grace, her eyes fixed on me, a mixture of

rage and determination burning within them.

This fight is no longer a mere clash but a battle for survival.



Gathering my energy, I delve deep into my magic reserves. With unwavering resolve, I channel my will into another lightning streamer adorned with wind calligraphy.

Tendrils of black energy begin swirling around me like a cyclone.

Flossie charges at me, consumed by a ghostly frenzy, but I stand firm, ready to unleash my full power. As she lunges again, I release the built-up energy in a cataclysmic explosion of dark magic. The force ripples through the room, shattering what remains of the glass windows. Flossie's figure is engulfed in the swirling vortex, her cries

echoing amidst the chaos.

When the dust settles, all that remains is a faint shimmer of ethereal essence lingering in the air. The fight is over. Flossie has been vanquished. Yet, the energy still crackles with a residual intensity.

I stagger back, gasping for breath. The battle has drained every ounce of my strength. Nevertheless, I stand victorious, knowing that I've not only survived but also fulfilled my duty as a charon.

The room falls silent again, the weight of the encounter settling upon me. I wipe the sweat from my brow, my heart pounding, and the adrenaline slowly subsiding.

I clutch the last shide tightly, grinning at the wickedness of this one—it's a total transformation lightning streamer. With a rebellious flick of my wrist, I hold the paper to the crackling energy swirling in the air. I dangle the intricate origami before me, watching it go up in flames. Flossie's spirit materializes, forming into a blazing orb exactly where the shide paper used to be. Like her supernatural glow, the magic within her sparkles separates from all the heavy emotions that would've trapped her as a poltergeist.

My chest swells with pride like I just leveled up in a game.

The orb of light shoots out from my fingers, soaring through the pouring rain. I feel her overwhelming relief as she flutters away, vanishing from my sight.

However, the triumph of setting her free from a lifetime of suffering is short-lived. I can't help but look down at Flossie's lifeless body as her final breath escapes her lips. The real Flossie Hammersmith is on her way to the Nether After now, where she can chill with Mrs. Wang and sip tea for eternity.

I can't leave her like this, lying there in that sorry state. I'm at a loss for what to do next. I want to undo the restraints that hold her to the bed, but I stop before I even touch the first buckle. This is personal, you know? She's just an empty shell now, and for some unknown reason, I don't want her to be found all tied up, lying in a mess of her own making. It's like she deserves better, some dignity

in death.

I've been hesitating because whoever checks on her will notice the loose and undone restraints.

But damn it, I shouldn't be feeling like this. I did what I had to do.

I released Flossie's spirit, saving her from a tortured afterlife. My mind is spinning with a million questions, though. How long will it take for someone to realize she's gone? Probably not until the flies start to swarm around her. Sometimes, it's hard to remember that humans aren't like us, the charon. They only care about themselves, completely oblivious to the lonely old ladies fading away.

Pure anger courses through me, and I can't help but kick a few water pans, sending them crashing into the wall. It's just not fair, you know? No one should die alone. They should have someone there, someone who gives a damn. Family should, at the very least, know what the hell happened to them.

I reach for the restraints again, determined to give Flossie some respect when a loud squawk cuts through the air.

A vulture perches on the fire escape, hopping from rung to rung, pecking on Flossie's window as if it wants to get in. But I don't need its creepy presence. Flossie's spirit proved she could make it to the Nether After alone. I don't need some scavenger bird to act as her ride. Ignoring the vulture's pestering, it transforms into a ghostly figure, passing through the glass pane. It settles on the radiator, not bothered by the heat oozing from the pipes.

"Smooth featherbrain, really inconspicuous. What the hell do you want?"

I glare at the vulture, its amber eyes locked with mine. Bald head bobbing back and forth, wings spread wide, it's anything but your average bird.

"Does the old lush want another round of necromancy harvesting from me?"

The vulture's pupils flash orange, and it starts to gag. If only I could pluck its feathers right off. This bird staring me down isn't

some ordinary creature. It's a magical construct from the Eternal Court used to deliver messages. Convenient disguise, considering real vultures are always circling the skies for corpses.

The bird convulses, and a ring drops from its beak, hitting the floor. I cringe at the thought of digging through bird vomit, but I know a message awaits me. If it were up to me, we'd find a cleaner way to talk. Something that doesn't involve puking up secret messages in rings. These soul birds sure know how to keep charon communications hidden.

Nobody ever suspects a vulture's puke.

"What in the world?"

I snatch the ring off the floor. Enchanted objects like this normally hold my soul-harvesting dossiers, but this ring is different. It's too big, almost like those fancy rings they give to superstar graduates at magic schools. And it feels off somehow. Without thinking, I slip it onto my thumb, expecting another dossier to materialize.

Instead, I find a photograph and a small handwritten note.

Dearest Faust, please come to Ris Norsing.

It's urgent we talk. Sincerely, Opa.

I stare at the message, dumbfounded. Ris Norsing, my grandfather's territory from my childhood. My old man wants nothing to do with my mom's side of the family since she's gone. I haven't seen Opa in years. Nostalgia washes over me, tinged with a strange sensation.

The photo captures a street in Ris Norsing, bustling with ghosts. Two-story buildings and cobblestone streets, with Gothic cathedrals, sandwiched between wooden storefronts. Most look like shops, you know, bakeries and textile emporiums.

It's nothing like the city and buildings I know. No pagodas, vibrant gardens, or paper lanterns lighting the way.

Instead, cold gas lamps illuminate the streets, guiding ghosts to shop and dine. It's way more industrial than I'm used to, giving me the creeps. The photo reminds me of those I've seen in old dusty

books. It's a place called Europe, which disappeared in the fourth world war. WWIV happened long before I was even born.

"Please come to Ris Norsing." The words echo in my mind, and I ponder what the old codger wants now.

He hasn't bothered reaching out to our family since Mom was taken. Confusion swirls inside me as I tuck the ring into my pocket. I'm not rushing over to him because he summoned me. Opa will have to wait, assuming I even feel like going.

The vulture perched on the radiator gives me the stink-eye as if expecting a response. Could it be waiting for an answer? I hand over Flossie's dossier, and as soon as the file folder touches the bird's beak, it vanishes. Stretching its wings, the vulture takes off into the rain, utilizing death magic to return to the netherworld, the same place I should be heading now that I'm done draining the magic out of Flossie's death.

I tap into my necromancy, and the eerie sensation of spider webs crawls over my skin. I concentrate, letting the feeling envelop me.

"Home," I call out, shutting my eyes real tight.

I picture my bedroom—thick velvet drapes hanging on the window, shoji screens fencing in my room, and a badass black chandelier dangling from the ceiling.

Without bothering to open my eyes, I step forward, feeling myself free-falling.

The freaky necromancy engulfs me, freezing my limbs as I plunge from the land of the living into the creepy-ass world of the dead. My power drains away, seeping into the tight spaces that bridge here and my crib in the Nether After. When I open my eyes again, I'm standing in my bedroom, surrounded by my usual junk.

My oxfords barely brush the floor when an excited squeal pierces my eardrums.

"Faust, Faust, Faust."

I stretch my arms wide, and my little sis slams into me like a bat out of hell. I scoop her up in a hug. Carol is the baby of the family

and a bundle of energy. She's got Mom's platinum blond hair and my tan skin. Her eyes are all slanted and sharp like Mom's. Out of all of us, Carol's the spitting image of Mom.

Poor kiddo can't even remember what our mom looks like. She was only five when those creeps took her away, and she's got no sweet memories of having someone take care of her. Too young to do any necromancy magic, she's stuck in this freaking house all day with her storybooks and voodoo dolls. It might be cool if she had some other kids from the underworld to hang with or a parent to keep an eye on her, but our family isn't lucky enough for that.

"Where's everyone at?" I ask, even though I know the damn answer.

Anger brews beneath my fake smile. Instead of my sister Geraldine or my pops looking after her, they let her roam this damn mansion alone.

If my old man would let some of my ghost buddies visit, she'd at least have someone else to talk to.

No, my pops thinks we should stay away from the dead like it'll make them move on or some other bull crap. It's just some messed-up charon propaganda.

"Geri said she ain't coming home tonight... and Dad—" Carol cuts herself off, her eyes locked on my hands.

I realize I'm clenching my fists so tight that my knuckles are white. Shit, I'm not hiding my anger well. I sigh and release my grip, letting Carol's feet touch the ground again.

"It's cool. I'm home now. You and I can chill all evening." I promise, a sly grin on my face.

"For real?"

"For real," I confirm.

Carol eyes me skeptically, thinking I might be messing with her.

"Can I mess with your hair? I promise I won't ruin your mini-braids." She asks, her curiosity getting the best of her.

"Sure thing, and if you've got nail polish remover, I might even let you paint my nails black."

Carol looks at me like I'm a freaking god.

"You must've had a crazy day. You never let me paint your nails." She grins wide, revealing a missing tooth.

"All the cool necromancers rock black nail polish," I say with a smirk, letting her tug on my arm.

I let her drag me into her bedroom, an all-out assault on my senses with all the frilly pink crap and ruffles everywhere. It's so damn prim. You'd think a princess lives here. We spend the next few hours playing beauty parlor and board games. Later, Mrs. Wang shows up with a stash of take-out boxes, most of which are not on the usual menu. She made it special for the two of us.

My eyes keep glancing at Carol's door all evening, waiting for my pops to stumble upstairs and check on her, but he never shows.

"Read me this story?" Carol asks, her big yawns giving away her exhaustion. I flip through the storybook, finding it ironic as hell.

"Rapunzel again?"

I read five pages before Carol's yawns win the battle, and she drifts into dreamland. Leaning over to tuck her in and turn off the light, my grandfather's ring slips from my pocket, landing on the floor with a soft thud.

Damn, I forgot I had that ring in my pocket the whole time. I scoop up the golden band from the tatami mat and look closer. The rectangular onyx stone with a silver horse carved into it catches my eye. I slide the ring onto my thumb, not knowing what to expect, but the necromantic mojo inside is spent.

The ring delivers no more letters or photos from Grandpa. Disappointed, I shove it back in my pocket and glance at Carol, snoozing like an angel.

That lush didn't bother checking on her. He didn't even make sure she had dinner. Frustration gnaws at my insides. I'm fifteen years old and the only one in this messed-up family with an ounce of responsibility.

I don't give a crap how my pops treats me, but Carol's still a baby. She can't even cook rice without burning it.

Quietly closing Carol's door, I make my way downstairs to my pops' lab.

CHAPTER 3

INTO THE ABYSS

It's no big secret that my pops enjoys experimenting on things. He doesn't care whether it's alive or dead, either.

Jars filled with floating dead animals line the cold steel shelves. The pungent scent of formaldehyde fills the air. My footsteps sound thunderous as they fall on the mix of black and white granite on the floor. As I make my way into the room, I can first see chemicals bubbling in huge glass vats along the walls. The room is illuminated by the flickering green glow of the stained glass lights overhead, casting eerie shadows that dance across the room.

In one human-sized tube, an eight-eyed spider fixes its gaze on me. The sight sends a shiver down my spine, its multiple legs twitching with anticipation, its mandibles bared at me.

What truly unsettles me is the low growl that reverberates in the cavernous room, followed by the heavy thud of footsteps echoing behind me. I whip around quickly, and my heart pounds as I face a hulking beast, its hot breath washing over me. The stench of damp fur and earth fills my nostrils, mixing with a faint hint of something more primal and dangerous.

The creature seems to ignore me entirely and moves into the shadows of the lab. It's purpose to me unknown.

Monsters.

Instead of collecting souls or using his necromancy to find ways to better charon kind. My father, Mortimer Thaed, is cooking up spider monsters in the basement. Why can't he be a regular dad? The type of man you can ask how to shave or if big or little boobs are better. Instead, my old man is sprawled out with a stack of old

newspapers, still gripping a bottle of hooch even though he's asleep. I glance at the clock on the wall. It's a quarter past eleven, but I don't care. Dad's lab hasn't been cleaned in days.

I gather some old newspapers and toss them aside, their sensational headlines catching my attention. "Xeno Dragons Spotted Collaborating with Humans." "Humanity on the Brink of Extinction: How to Safeguard Your Necromancy." My favorite piece of muckraker journalism: "Xeno Charon Releases Monsters into Hong Kong Nuclear Wasteland."



I glare at the mutant spider again and shudder. Well, that headline may be true, but I hope not. The last thing I need is for my father's escaped creepy crawlies to go snacking down upon the humans, creating more work for me.

The more I clean, the more ticked off I get. The trash is mostly empty booze containers. I tighten my grip on an open bottle of hooch I was about to toss. Then it hits me, a better idea. I grab the steel waste paper bin and chuck my old man's empty sake bottle

into the trash as hard as possible. Shattering glass breaks the silence. The sharp shards crash into the bottom of the can.

My old man jolts awake, scared out of his wits. He probably is wondering if one of the chimeras has gotten loose. Maybe he's worried a poisonous spider's about to cocoon him and chomp down on his head.

The effect doesn't last nearly as long as I want it to.

The sudden movement sends a gust of stale breath my way, carrying the stench of alcohol and regret. His bloodshot eyes squint in the harsh laboratory lights.

"What are you doing down here?" he asks, his voice hoarse and tinged with irritation. He probably doesn't remember falling asleep in his lab. Pop's black hair falls over his eyes, giving the impression of a tussled vampire waking from slumber. This pisses me off even more. I give him a self-righteous look of indignation.

"It's past eleven o'clock. You didn't bother cooking anything for Carol." I retort, my voice tinged with a mix of anger and disappointment. The words hang in the air, the tension thickening with each passing second.

Pop's voice drips with annoyance, "Then make her something yourself."

He adjusts the knobs on the Bunsen burner. A spark ignites the gas, and a faint hiss fills the room. The smell of burning fuel mingles with the underlying scent of old books and lingering smoke.

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. The distant hum of machinery and the soft crackle of flames provide a constant backdrop to our tense exchange. My dad slips on his wire-framed spectacles, and the illusion of youth breaks as his eyes grow two inches.

"We already had take-out, and there's still some leftovers in the ice chest if you're hungry. Carol's in bed now. She says you left her alone in her room all day. Did you even think about feeding her at all today? Or do I need to start packing her lunch too?"

My old man isn't inherently mean but he can't seem to put down the bottle since my mother was hauled away. He waves his hand dismissively at me like I'm some pesky bug.

I refuse to be ignored.

My father is clearly nursing a hangover, and I'm determined to make him miserable. I make all of my movements as loud and noisy as I can. I let the steel trash can crash to the floor, not giving a damn if it lands upright. I crank up the dimmer on the laboratory lights, making them blindingly white. Next time the lush will think twice before taking a swig.

"What do you want, Faust? Did you have problems with your soul harvests? Are the housekeepers not doing a thorough enough job washing your socks?"

Considering I was trying to be courteous and clean up after him, I couldn't keep the sarcasm from dripping off my tongue.

"You might want to know about your children's day since you've been pinned up in your lab all night. Geraldine is out screwing her boyfriend. She'll probably come home pregnant. You forgot to feed your eight-year-old daughter. So how was your day today? Any scientific breakthroughs?"

My father takes a large gulp of the sake he's holding, then lays the bottle down by his lab equipment. Part of me wishes he'd get so drunk he'd drink a vial of acid and kill himself.

His fist hits my face before I can even brace for the impact. My teeth rattle against each other under the force of his knuckles. The booze seems to make him five times stronger. I grab my face, feeling a warm bruise forming.

What did I expect to happen?

I wanted him to apologize for neglecting Carol and storm out to drag Geraldine home. My father won't do that. Unsatisfied I'm still standing, Dad strikes me again, sending me sprawling to the floor. If I were human, he would've shattered my jaw. Instead, he has only managed to give me a bloody lip. My nose is dripping blood. Lucky for me, my natural biology allows me to take a lot of abuse without

suffering permanent damage. Not a soul will ever expect us to have these little exchanges. Dad drops a clay vial by my head. The leather cord smacks my bloody nose.

My father's face changes from unconcerned to apologetic so quickly that I can't even process what's rattling around his brain.

"Sorry, I don't understand my own strength. You should clean yourself up."

My fist wraps around the pandora vial, but I don't uncork the clay cylinder to free the healing necromancy inside. I'd rather leave the blood on my face than use my father's healing device to fix my wounds.

My father returns to reading the papers on his desk. When he speaks again, I can hear a bit of anxiousness in his voice. "I won't put up with you throwing stuff in my laboratory. You might damage my research. What if you accidentally let the experiments out?"

A fat lot of chance that's ever going to happen. If I ever unleash the mutant horde down here, it will be because I'm tired of being a part of this family, and I've decided to take Carol and run. I can't do that right now. Where would the two of us escape to? Who would take us in? At this point, Carol and I might be better off being wards of the state.

A part of me wishes we could be a family again. It's not possible without Mom.

Then blatantly, he ignores me and scribbles down some shaky math on a chalkboard. I hide the snarl on my face underneath my long braids. I hate not having any control over my life. He doesn't care about Carol or me. All he cares about is whatever experiment he's working on.

My father sits in his office chair and rolls over to his microscope. He adjusts a few dials, changing the magnification and acting like nothing has transpired.

I can't stand another minute inside the house.

My feet pound against the stairs as I sprint, not slowing down

until I slide into the front yard. My shoes rip clumps of moss from the rock garden, but I couldn't care less about the damage.

Dad's meticulously manicured lawn resembles one painted scene on a Chinese vase. It all feels so hollow to me. What's the point of maintaining a perfectly staged rock garden when no visitors appreciate it? No one comes to our house anymore since Mom was taken from us. It's all superficial, like everything else in my life. Each day feels like an exhausting charade, pretending everything is fine when it's far from it.

A tightness grips my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I unleash my frustration on the carefully arranged rocks, kicking them over and digging my heels into the raked gravel. As I search for more things to break, a shadow blankets me.

Looking up, I see the sky trapped in eternal twilight, frozen in sunset hues.

It should be dark outside, long past midnight, but in the Nether After, time holds no sway, and the world reflects the whims of the ghosts that inhabit it.

I take several deep breaths and shove the leather corded pandora vial in my pocket.

Why do I keep reaching out to him?

My father is a complete idiot, oblivious to the needs of his children. Geraldine wouldn't act out if he gave her even a sliver of attention. Carol needs her Dad. He's the only parent we have. Maybe that jackass isn't aware of what's happening, or maybe he is, and he doesn't care.

I lean against a tree and slide down its rough bark, feeling the texture scrape against my back. Above me, I hear the flapping of bird wings. A vulture perches in the branches, its glowing orange eyes brimming with impatience. Its beak clasps a shimmering gold soul, similar to the one I ripped from Flossie's chest earlier today.

Abruptly, the soul bird takes flight, soaring across the garden. Intrigued, I rise and follow its path.

More vultures swoop through the sky, each carrying a soul in its

beak. They circle the aviary, waiting to enter the pagoda through its buzzard-sized windows. Yet, there's a flaw in the necromancy, a discord that rattles in my mind.

I snort in amusement, witnessing my father's flawless soul collection system falter. The vultures' beaks are empty, and as they dive toward the pagoda, they rebound off an invisible force field. Confusion fills their gaze as they stare at me.

It's not my fault. The necromancy that granted them life should have ended once they delivered the soul. The vultures don't comprehend the difference. They flap around or peck at the ground, waiting for entry.

It's ironic that a man who wields necromancy like a well-honed weapon can make such a mistake. Like most affluent charon, my father has access to secret spell books that remain hidden from the rest of us. With this clandestine necromancy, they can imbue death into anything their minds conceive.

As much as I despise my old man, a secret part of me yearns to be like him.

I eagerly await the day when I won't need paper offerings and can stand my ground against him, wielding necromancy more skillfully than he ever did.

I yank on the iron ring of the pagoda's door, thinking I should check inside the aviary. The vultures carrying the souls squawk at me, hopping from one perch to another. They let go of the glowing orbs held in their beaks as they do. I'm not paying attention to those fake birds.



My eyes stay fixed on the bright orbs as they dance and pulse in the air like fireflies. All the souls in my old man's territory end up in this pagoda. Only a small fraction of them will turn into ghosts, but none of that has happened yet. I glance up at the open rafters of the aviary. These souls are all in perfect harmony, balanced in this world. The light orbs clump together so tightly that they form a river of light flowing into the sky. The collected dead swirl above me, creating a whirlpool of shimmering golden light. Its warm glow brushes against my face. Without the sacrifices of all these people and their final moments, us charon wouldn't have necromancy to wield. Then what the hell would we be? Regular humans?

I'm feeling calmer now. I stuff my hands into my pockets, planning to head to bed. My thumb brushes against the photograph

my grandpa sent me. I pull it out and study the alien city depicted in it.

It may be time to find out what the old geezer wants.

I remove his ring from my vest and stab my thumb through it. I only focus on the coordinates scribbled at the bottom of the picture. I imagine Ris Norsing—the cobblestone streets, the wooden buildings, the endless twilight skies lit by gas lamps. A rush of air rips the leaves off the trees. The necromancy is happening, but it feels off. It's struggling to lock on. I glance back down at the photograph, searching for small details and forcing a thin line of magic from my body as I scrutinize the image for an object to anchor to. My gaze lands on a boat suspended by a massive gas balloon. I'm trying to figure out what the heck that dirigible is doing there, and then it hits me, the ghosts in Ris Norsing travel to the afterlife on zeppelins.

I can barely make out the waves below. For some stupid reason, I can't remember the river's name. We call it the Sanzu River here in Xeno. In Ris Norsing, it's got some other name. The wind is picking up now. It bends the branches, making the trees shiver and crack.

The vultures are screeching, and black feathers rain down on me like someone tore open a damn pillow.

That river, it's a Greek word. I think it starts with an "S." Damn it, what's the name of that blasted river? As if called forth by my frustration, I hear my mom's voice calling it the River Styx. She used to tell me that all charon trace their roots back to the original ferryman of that river. It's just a bedtime story. The magic locks on.

The world drains of color, and necromancy ripples through the air. The sensation of being entombed wraps around me. It feels all wrong. My body stretches and pulls like an accordion. For a brief moment, I glimpse a steam-powered dirigible beneath me. There's no ground beneath my feet. The tendrils of necromancy tear away, and I start to fall.

CHAPTER 4

WELCOME TO RISNORSING

I take a crazy nosedive, free-falling for like thirty feet. A splash of gross, muddy water shoots up high as I smash into the river. My head goes under, and everything's murky and silt-filled, making it impossible to see a thing. The water is so cold it feels like an ice bath. I can't even tell which way is up or down, and that's when panic starts clawing into my chest. I'm frantically searching for the riverbed or the surface, desperate for something solid to hold onto.

Out of nowhere, heavy ropes from a fishing net slice through the water, and one wraps around my ankle. No matter how much I kick and thrash, the dang current keeps yanking me deeper into the darkness.

My lungs are burning, searing with each breath I can't take.

I try to fight against the net, but my eyes start seeing black spots, and I know I'm in deep trouble.

The breath I've been holding escapes my lips, replaced by water that rushes up my nose, making me cough like crazy. Quickly, there's no air left to cough, and I feel like I'm passing out.

I'm drowning. I can't breathe. My limbs are like lead, barely able to move. My arms and legs flail everywhere, but it's useless.

Then, all of a sudden, someone pulls on the net, and I get yanked back to reality.

My head breaches the surface. I cough up some nasty water I accidentally swallowed.

That's when I noticed my ankle was tangled up in the top of the fishing net. I'm hanging upside down like the hangman from a tarot card or something. The river is splashing against my face, inches

away, and let me tell you, it tastes like straight-up sewage and oil. The wind whips my braids, smacking them right into my eyes, and the stupid net keeps banging against the side of an airship.

I reach into my vest pocket and grab the pandora vial my dad made. It's one of his necromancy creations, and I'm grateful to have it with me for once.

With trembling hands, I unplug the vial, and it sucks out that drowning sensation straight from my lungs. The vial's healing powers kick in and start fixing up my messed-up toes, soothing the pain in my ankle. Whoever saved me gives me a hard yank, hauling me onto the dirigible.

I'm broken, bruised, and battered, but I know I'll survive this crazy ordeal. The steam-powered dirigible hovers ominously in the mist-filled sky, its massive metallic frame gleaming with a dull luster. Ornate brass pipes and gears adorned its exterior, intertwining in a mesmerizing display of intricate machinery. The rhythmic hiss of escaping steam echoed through the air, creating an eerie backdrop to the vessel's presence.

"Look at that, blokes! We've fished up a dragon," the voice taunts, accompanied by laughter and snide remarks. I know I'm in the right place, Ris Norsing. The thick blend of European accents persists here, even after four world wars.

"I've never seen an etheric transfer like yours. Do dragons usually take a plunge? Guess it's the only way you folks from Xeno get your baths," they jeer, mixing French, German, English, and Swedish in a guttural mishmash of slang and laughter.

As I gag on the toxic swill they call a river, I realize my feeble voice betrays me. "Thanks for saving me. Who are you?" I manage to mutter, my words strained and gravelly. I anxiously await a response from the dirigible crew, gritting my teeth.

No one answers. Uneasy glances are exchanged among the men. The dirigibles giant propellers spin tirelessly, their blades cutting through the fog with a haunting whirl, casting eerie shadows on the deck below.

"Wow, who'd have thought he could speak English," one of them sneers.

It strikes me as odd—of course, I speak English. My mother is from Ris Norsing. Just because I'm from Xeno doesn't mean I'm limited to Xenese.

"It seems the little dragon had a rough swim. Let's leave him up here in the riggings to dry out.

Maybe those glowing orange eyes will attract vultures," suggests another, gripping the net ensnaring my leg. He yanks it forcefully, sending waves of pain cascading down my knee.

I reach into my mortician's jacket, intending to cast a curse that would haunt this fool for centuries. When I retrieve the shide from my pocket, it turns out to be a handful of wet paper. My spells have dissolved in the river, leaving me defenseless and vulnerable.

A man with a hint of a French accent grabs the riggings and swings me around. "Dragons mean nothing to us. Heck, we don't give a damn about any foreigners. Especially those trying to spy on us."

"I'm not a spy," I gasp, struggling to catch my breath. My pleas fall on deaf ears as the crew continues their assault.

The net swings like a piñata, and they bludgeon me with boards and anything they can find. I cry out, desperately trying to make them stop. Red welts mar my skin, and a nail-studded board connects with my head, the net shielding me from its full impact. Blood trickles down the bridge of my nose as the nails puncture my skin. Luckily I'm still wearing the pandora vial, and it's sucking in injuries as soon as they are made.

"Enough! My grandfather summoned me here," I protest, hoping to reason with them.

"Who's your gramps, the river god?" mocks a bald man, finding amusement at my expense. He brings his board down hard on the net, crushing my fingers, and I howl in agony.

"My grandfather is Aldrich Maher," I declare, hoping to strike a chord of recognition.

Suddenly, the crew falls silent, their gazes fixed upon me in disbelief.

"But... but you're a Xeno Dragon," stammers a greasy-haired man in a red shirt.

I feign vulnerability, attempting to appear small and young. Widening my eyes and trembling my lip as if on the verge of tears isn't much of an act. That board with the nails genuinely hurts. These jerks might as well gift me a tetanus shot.

"Opa told me to come here. He said it was urgent. He could be sick or even dying. Please, you've got to let me go," I implore, hoping they'll buy into this pitiful act.

Something changes in the way the crew looks at me. It's not shock or disgust. It's as if they want nothing to do with me. Half the dirigible team gradually steps back like I carry some contagious disease. Within minutes, all but two sailors turn away, engrossed in preparing to dock the airship.

"Do you think he's connected to the higher-ups?" Greasy asks.

"I have a letter written by his hand." I exclaim, frantically searching my pockets. However, the letter in my pants proves as futile as my dissolved lightning streamers. Instead, I show them the photograph, the inked coordinates smudged at the bottom.

A huge racket erupts as the dirigible collides with the metal scaffolding, producing a shrill scraping sound as the hull of a patchwork of weathered wood and reinforced metal brushes by the dock. Rusty chains dangled from various points on the ship's sides hook the scaffolding.



My stomach churns, fearing the balloon might burst at any moment.

No one seems particularly concerned except for me. It appears to be business as usual.

When I look back at the crew, only two still pay attention to me. The rest are busy securing the dirigible to the dock as they connect the ship. The flickering gas lamps shiver as the wavering light struggles to pierce the thick mist. Wisps of steam curl and dances as the vessel glides into the dock. The clanking of machinery and the occasional burst of steam served as a haunting symphony, evoking a sense of foreboding.

Greasy and Baldy stand nearby, their eyes fixed on my waterlogged letter.

"Only the necromancers have photographs with coordinates on them. You think it's true?" Baldy asks, wiping his sweaty hands on his overalls.

"Just because he's got a photograph doesn't mean it came from Maher. If he were a spy, he'd have all sorts of this rot. The newsies reported a whole group of spies from Wasatch getting caught. Some big military guy thought he could stroll in and snoop around. You know what they did to him," Greasy says, sliding his finger across his throat.

Baldy looks skeptical, constantly checking over his shoulder as if expecting to be reprimanded by some invisible superior.

"My grandma always said never to mess with the big necromancer families. Those corrupt bastards sic the Leiche Guard on you if you cross them. Let's hand him over to the authorities. I don't want to find out we've been beating up Maher's grandson. I've got three little ones to take care of. Unlike you, I have a family to support. What will I do if the Leiche Guard shows up at my door with arrest papers?"

The Leiche Guard? If only they would show up.

The Guard consists of powerful necromancers who protect all the charon nations. Understandably, Greasy and Baldy would be afraid of them.

The sad truth is, I'm afraid of them too.

A flickering memory of my mother being dragged away surfaces in my mind. I remember how rough they were, forcing her into that straitjacket.

For all I know, the Leiche Guard could be snatching charon worldwide, which could be becoming a common occurrence.

If they were to appear right now, would they make us all vanish? A shiver is sent down my spine.

"Are you Maher's grandson? If what you're saying is true, you're one of those kids Aldrich's daughter had with the dragon."

A wave of anger surges through my veins. Referring to my dad as a dragon doesn't bother me that much. Insinuating that my mother's choice to have me was somehow beneath her pushes all the wrong buttons.

If I could cast a spell right now, I know it would accidentally

obliterate this imbecile.

Of course, that wouldn't be a wise move in a foreign country. I've never been in trouble with the law before.

Besides taking my mom away, I've never had issues with the Leiche Guard. From what I understand, their sole purpose is to apprehend the most despicable charon, those who torture humans for pleasure or attempt to enslave the spirits of the netherworld for personal gain.

The sound of boots clanging against the metal scaffolding fills my ears. It could be my salvation or my doom. At this moment, I don't know which.

I hear some commotion but can't discern what's happening on the zeppelin dock. A mixture of anxiety and disgust crosses Greasy's face. Baldy rushes to the edge of the zeppelin, his ears turning bright red with worry.

He hurries back to me, a knife in hand, and begins cutting me down from the net.

"See? I told you. You don't mess with the big necromancer families. Maher must have sent the guard to take us all," he mutters, his voice trembling.

Greasy seems unaffected by the situation.

"They're here for the boy. They must have smelled his foreign stench as soon as he appeared from the ether. He's a spy. I'm tellin' you."

Baldy remains focused on his task, cutting through the ropes one by one with his knife. A cold sweat breaks out on my neck, and my necromantic powers stir within me, itching to be unleashed.

"Maher is gonna have us floating in coffins on the Styx, for sure," Baldy adds, his voice filled with dread.

"Your mommy got hauled away by the Eternal Court, right? That nutcase Calypso, who tried to teach necromancy to the humans," Greasy taunts, a smirk on his face.

"What did you call my mother? Say it again, asshole. I dare you to repeat it," I seethe, my anger rising.

Greasy swings the cargo net again, sending me into a dizzying spiral. I grit my teeth, fingernails digging into my palms, drawing blood.

I'll make them pay when I'm free from this net. My mother would have never been foolish enough to teach necromancy to humans. She was a good, honest woman and an exceptional necromancer.

A voice from the mast screams, "The guard is boarding."

The approaching soldiers shove Baldy aside, and they take hold of the net. The dirigible crew retreats to the front of the ship, leaving Baldy and Greasy too intimidated to utter a word.

"Did my Opa send you?" I whisper to one of the gray-cloaked guard members, hoping for an answer.

No answer comes. The Leiche Guard they're all covered up, their faces hidden behind these eerie black mesh screens. They don't want anyone to know who they are, which amps up the spooky factor. Their long gray cowls flow down from their heads, practically touching the ground and making them look like ghostly figures.

What gets my attention is when one of them steps forward. He's got this huge saber in his hand. It's seriously massive. The blade is all shiny and sharp, and it looks like it means business. The way he wields it, it's like he's done this a million times. He doesn't hesitate for a second, and with one swing, he cuts through the net that had me all tangled up. It's like he's a pro, effortlessly slicing through those ropes like they're made of butter.

I can't help but feel a mix of awe and unease.

These Leiche Guard guys are no joke. They've got this air of power and mystery around them, and it's clear they're not to be messed with.

I would have been impressed if I weren't tangled up inside the net, my face smacks firmly onto the dirigible deck.

I start to get up and dust myself off, but the guard shoves me down to the floor, spreading my legs with his boot. Six of the Leiche

Guard surrounded me. They are sizing me up by the stance they have taken.

I can't figure out why they think I'm hostile. Is it because of the color of my skin?

"I'm unarmed. My name is Faust Thaed, Son of Calypso Maher and Mortimer Thaed, grandson of Aldrich Maher. I've been summoned here by my grandfather. The Eternal Court has given me clearance to be here."

I can't tell if I'm talking to a man or a woman. The smoky gray uniforms make them look completely androgynous. All of the masked guards remain silent. I need proof of what I can do to make them believe me and keep them from executing me on the spot. I nervously twist Opa's ring on my finger before I realize I got all the proof I need sitting on my hand. I toss my grandfather's ring to the guard.

Why didn't I think of it before? It's got his crest on it, and I highly doubt many charon use solid gold rings to send messages. One of the Leiche Guards grabs it from the air and stares at the ring, not indicating that my words have been understood. At once, they all take another step forward.

What will I do? The Nether After's most dangerous enforcers encircle me as if I'm some wild animal ready to strike.

Should I try to run?

CHAPTER 5

TWO LEICHE GUARDS

The Leiche Guard's clunky combat boots step forward in unison, tightening their formation. I curse myself for letting them know I'm unarmed. No one on the dirigible is coming to help me.

The shortest soldier reaches for a shide, catching me completely off guard.

The person under the cloak must be as young as me. Only kids my age mess with offerings. Who the hell lets someone my age into the Leiche Guard? I don't have time to dwell on it now.

The paper in the guard's hand burns away, revealing a pair of creepy lead feed bags. It takes me a second to figure out they are shackles. The guard crouches down to shackle me, and I fight every instinct not to resist. The necromancy tingling under my skin warns me that something is off.

I can't listen to those primal urges. After all, I'm a stranger in a strange land. These faceless men and women have been trained to capture rogue necromancy users. What if they think I'm a spy like the dirigible crew said?

If I try to run, the Leiche Guard will smite me. They're sanctioned to use any spell craft they see fit to enforce their idea of peace.

Cold metal tubes lock around my hands, draining every ounce of magic from me.

I feel hollow and empty inside. The weight almost makes me collapse. My head spins, but I fight to keep it together. These shackles—they're sucking away my magic. The lead encasing my hands is designed to stop me from performing any spells. I can't pull

out a shide or toss a spell with these things on. My arms hang heavily in front of me, and I can't support the weight of the restraints. They're way heavier than they look.

I feel like a chimp trying to walk on two legs. The sheer weight of the contraption ensures I can't make a run for it.

I glance at the youngest member of the Leiche Guard, desperately trying to reason with them. "Look, if you find my grandfather, he'll clear everything up. This is a huge misunderstanding, I swear."

The Leiche Guard ignores my pleas, leading me away from the docks and into a dark alleyway. The farther we walk, the seedier the streets become. No one has bothered to sweep these alleys for months. Graffiti covers the walls, giving the place a rundown feel.

The constant sound of rushing water fills my ears as it pours into the storm drains—the air reeks of dead fish and diesel, making my nose scrunch up in disgust.

There are barrels with squirming worm-like things sitting there, uncovered. Ghostly hands reach through the walls, trying to grab at the barrels. I can't tell if the barrels contain food or vermin, but the ghosts seem eager to get their hands on them.

I don't have much time to think about the barrels, though, as someone nudges me from behind, urging me further into the cramped ghost quarters. A few spirits dart through the streets, keeping a safe distance from the Leiche Guard. It hits me then—nobody is coming to help me.

The ghosts are terrified of these guards, and that gets me worried.

Nobody even knows I'm here.



From a dripping catwalk above, a ghost with blond hair and pale

blue skin locks eyes with me briefly. She won't hold my gaze and quickly disappears through the wall, joining the spirits on the other side.

The guards lead me away from the spirit district.

The shortest Leiche Guard member darts ahead in a rush, moving aside old pallets to reveal a hole in the building's brick facade. I can't help but wonder why we aren't going through the door like normal people. The guards scramble through the hole, and someone pushes down on my head, forcing me to duck inside.

The sharp tip of a long knife is dragged beneath my ribs, prodding me further. The sound of rearranged pallets echoes in front of the hole in the wall.

I'm forcefully pushed under a catwalk adorned with hanging chains. The metal links smack against my cheek and clang against my lead shackles.

This isn't a processing office. Why did they bring me here?

Taking in my surroundings, I find myself in an unused warehouse filled with large wooden crates and pulleys. Thick black shoe polish covers all the windows, blocking out any trace of daylight. A worn advertisement is painted on the wall, but I can't distinguish the words.

"I haven't done anything wrong. Surely you, Leiche Guard, can at least tell me what I've been accused of," I plead, hoping for clarity.

Suddenly, someone from the left slams me into an empty steel drum. Fist after fist pummels my stomach and sides—a ringed finger tears at my face and jaw. They're beating me, but the pain is numbed by the open pandora vial hanging from my neck. The tallest guard starts rummaging through my clothing, searching my pockets. He lets out a frustrated sigh.

"All he has on him is some wet paper. Probably the dork's shides," he scoffs.

Leiche Guards don't speak like that. Who are these people?

"Not smart, letting your offerings get wet. It's hard for a newbie

dragon to cast necromancy without shides. Now be a good boy and tell us where your photos are. We need to escape to Xeno," one of them demands, their thick foreign accents attempting to speak German.

The accents sound Hindi, far from what I'd expect from a Ris Norsing necromancer.

Feeling the knife's point digging into the small of my back, I grit my teeth and try to respond.

"I don't have any dossiers on me. I only have the photo of Ris Norsing. My Opa invited me. Coming here was a spur-of-the-moment decision," I explain, hoping to appease them.

The guard holding me rips off his mask, his face turning beet red with anger. He has no hair, it's all shaved down to his skull, and a bright red tattoo adorns his face and forehead. He yells at me in a language I don't recognize, his words unfamiliar and jumbled. Eventually, he realizes I have no clue what he's saying, and his speech slurs into an odd mixture of German and another language.

"You're holding out on us. How do you plan to return home if you don't have a snapshot?" he accuses, clearly unaware of the basics of etheric transfer.

Don't they even understand the fundamental principles of necromancy? You don't always need a focusing object to find your way home. Your body can naturally return if you've been to a place once or twice. At least, that's how it works for me. My captors seem clueless about these basic principles. Perhaps they aren't the Leiche Guard. If they aren't, then what do they want with me?

The tattooed man delivers a few more punches to my face, but they barely face me. My older sister hits harder than him. I consider telling him so.

"I don't need a focusing object to find my way home, and I don't have any more photos on me. I was done with all my dossiers for today," I assert, hoping to convince them.

At this moment, I wish I had a photo of my home. My father would love to have unexpected guests to experiment on. I can

guarantee they wouldn't leave his lab without their bodies sewn to a mutant spider.

There's a jumble of voices that I can't decipher.

"No spell books, no necromancy supplies. He doesn't even have any extra photos on him."

"So we grabbed him for nothing? We won't even acquire a decent escape route from him," one of them grumbles in frustration.

"Capturing someone from a high necromancy family is still a significant achievement. It shows that we're growing stronger. Regardless, this will prove to the Eternal Court that they're vulnerable. They can't reside in their ivory towers, hoarding all the necromancy spells and souls for themselves. I say we go ahead and 'pop' him," another suggests.

Pop me? What does that even mean? I'm completely lost here. The language they're speaking may not translate into Xenese.

"Ask him what happened to Aabheer first. Surely he must know a bit about Aldrich's plans," one of them proposes.

"What's an Aabheer?" I demand, bewildered by the unfamiliar term.

A collective groan emanates from my captors, and they exchange frustrated glances.

The shortest Leiche Guard raises a glowing shide, and everyone's attention turns to her.

"He's not lying. My lie detector shide is still glowing green. I don't think he knows anything at all," she declares, confirming my innocence.

"Kill him already. I don't want to be executed in this territory like the last group did."

The guy with the sword pulls out a wicked-looking knife. He runs the tip of the blade across my forehead. I can feel my skin rip beneath the dull edge. The pandora vial is keeping it numb. I don't feel a thing except for something cool and wet spreading across my forehead.

I hear him grunt.

"He keeps healing. Recheck him. There isn't a charon alive who can heal that fast."

The woman holding me forcefully tugs on my tie, causing my vest to tear open and buttons to fly off my shirt. Her hand reaches into my neckline, revealing foreign jewelry embedded in her fingernails. The sharp metal and gemstones scratch against my skin, leaving painful marks on my neck.

"Stupid brat has a pandora vial uncorked. He must have opened it on the boat," she sneers.

With a swift motion, the vial is ripped away from me, and I feel a sucking sensation as its healing power is forcibly removed. A wave of pain washes over me, intensifying with every knife cut. Each slice feels excruciatingly worse without the pandora vial's numbing effects and healing abilities. Someone grabs my hair, yanking my head back, while another grips my jaw. Malicious amusement dances in their movements as the tip of the knife pierces through my cheek.

"What's wrong, necromancer? Didn't your mommy and daddy gift you some elite magic to use in situations like this?" one of them mocks.

"I bet he's some pampered brat who barely studies spellcraft," another adds.

The sadistic tormentor pushes the knife further, tearing apart the soft tissues of my cheek. The pain is unbearable, and I can't help but cry out, feeling the blade touch my tongue.

"He's seen our faces. No matter how much we're being paid, we can't leave him alive. It's not worth having to run from Mortimer and Maher," one of them declares.

"I'll do it," a young girl in a Leiche Guard uniform steps forward, her shide held up with plague magic characters scribbled on the paper. She's clearly a novice, her calligraphy barely legible. Ignorantly, she dangles the shide in front of my face.

My amber eyes lock onto the characters. Plague shides are known for their ability to induce disease, causing decay and

poisoning. They can resurrect the dead in a corrupted form, like Flossie.

The memory of her suffering is still vivid in my mind—the woman's boils, her agonizing coughs, and her eventual asphyxiation in my presence. The necromantic power courses through my blood, and I channel it from my toes to my lips. I unleash my necromancy by drawing strength from the white-hot anger surging within me.

My breath alone is enough to activate the shide. I direct my magic into the foreign ink, which eagerly absorbs it. The necromantic energy races through the characters, causing them to burst into a bright green flame. The shide catches fire, and the girl yelps in surprise, dropping the paper hastily.

"What did you cast?" one of my captors screamed.

The girl looked around in astonishment. "I swear I didn't cast anything yet."

A wisp of Flossie's spirit rattled the chains hanging from the catwalk. For a moment, I thought I saw her poltergeist.

It was too late.

The shide offering had already been made to Flossie. The entire warehouse grew as cold as a graveyard in the morning. My breath came out in little clouds of steam, and the hair on my arms stood up.

The others felt it too. Some of them rubbed themselves, feeling the cold sink into their bones. Little did they know, a disease capable of eating through my shackles had filled my palms and was eroding my lead restraints.

I stayed silent, pretending that nothing had happened, but something had. The girl who held the shide paper let out a screech as her skin started to be covered in boils. The young girl slapped herself, feeling the effects of the necromancy taking hold. More of these idiots developed large abscesses on their skin. The charon holding the knife dropped it in confusion, watching his hand wrinkle and blister with raw flesh and scabs.

Someone behind me also screamed. I heard a loud metallic clang

as something fell to the floor.

A large, dark figure jumped down from the stacked boxes above us. It was another Leiche Guard, and this man's palms were full of necrotic magic.

He had realized what I had done. As I bit my lower lip, preparing for death, a wave of purple energy surrounded me. The spell he flung at me bounced off a bubble of necromancy.

My heart pounded in my ears as I realized I was not dead.

A thick sheen of magic enveloped me. The bubble pulsed with each strangled beat of my heart, making breathing hard.

No way, was I doing this? I hadn't even used a shide. I gasped for breath.

A flung spell ricocheted off me and struck the young girl holding the shides. She was too confused to defend herself. The boils had all her attention, and the necromancy spell flung her to the floor, covering her in spellfire.

Outside, quick shadows darted past the windows covered in shoe polish.

"Marshall, we have problems. There are charon gathering outside the warehouse."

Some of my captors started to look worried.

The crowd near the windows tried to see who was outside amidst the confusion and yelling.

Amidst the chaos, my spell began to take root. They, too, started developing boils on their skin as they realized something was wrong. Another group of necromancers broke through the glass roof of the warehouse. Shards of broken glass fell from the ceiling as the newcomers descended from the roof on drop-lines.



At first, I didn't understand what I was seeing. The uniforms of

the newcomers were identical long gray cowls and faceless masks. They wore long black gloves and cast spells of their own, striking my captors.

There was a series of "whoomph whomph whomph" sounds as the spells made contact with my captors, flinging them away from my protective bubble. Faceless figures dressed in gray clothes started fighting amongst themselves.

A large Leiche Guard with a massive chest spins toward me. Flames danced from his black gloves as he threw a spell at the woman holding me.

I didn't recognize the necromancy, but the woman's clothes began to steam. She shrieked, desperately trying to remove the fake Leiche Guard uniform.

"Kill him. Hurry up and kill the boy." someone yells.

My necromancy continues to work. The woman holding me throws off her mask, retching up blood. Flossie's pain engulfs her, and Flossie's disease spreads through her body. I recognize the ghostly presence. The weight of the ghost's misery overwhelms my captors, making them easy targets for the newcomers.

The remaining lead shackle on my right-hand melts away, and the other lead weight clangs to the ground. The bonds sizzle on the concrete floor, losing their form as if made of acid instead of metal. With my hands free, I feel more confident. I swiftly kick the smallest of my assailants to the floor with a roundhouse.

The girl doesn't even attempt to defend herself. Two quick jabs immobilize her, allowing me to crouch and pin her to the ground. I've seen her use shides twice now, so I realize she must have more on her person. As she chokes on my necromancy, I dig through her clothing.

Gunfire echoes throughout the warehouse, making determining who is shooting at whom difficult. Everyone is dressed the same, and I have no intention of sticking around to find out who the good guys are. I swiftly remove all the shides from the girl's pockets, tightly gripping a lightning streamer in my fist.

Luck is on my side this time. It's an earth shide. I infuse the paper with my magic.

A molten glob of metal rises from my liquefied shackles, resembling a floating ball of mercury. The metal lacks direction.

I force myself to recall another death I've witnessed, envisioning someone unfortunate enough to fall into a steel refinery, their bones shattering as they plunged into the hot molten steel. The metal glob undulates before me, steam rising from its liquid exterior as it takes on a life of its own. It crashes into one of my attackers, impaling him.

The imposter Leiche Guard drops to his knees, and another blow from the spell cracks between his head and neck, rendering him unconscious. I scan the room for the tall man who had taken down the woman with jeweled fingernails. The other man is occupied with his adversary, sending another imposter sprawling onto the floor against the warehouse wall. The guy seems to have eyes in the back of his head as he turns to face me, sensing my stare.

The lead glob darts in front of me, transforming into a sharp metal cone capable of pinning the man to the wall.

"Faust, it's okay. Aldrich sent me," he says.

I press my tongue against my jaw and discover it has passed through my cheek. I'm free now, and there's no reason to trust this Leiche Guard or any Leiche Guard.

The tall figure is determined to reason with me, removing his faceless black mask to reveal his nut-brown skin. His face and neck have pockmarks, while his dark hair and eyes resemble soot.

My eyes fixate on the scar above his left eyebrow—a deep gouge that could have left him blind.

"It's okay, son. My name is Willis. I work for the Eternal Court," he says.

I do not move to indicate that I understand. My focus remains on my spell, brandishing it before me in case he makes any advances. However, I become so engrossed with this new adversary that I fail to realize someone is behind me.

A sharp sword pierces through my stomach, exiting through my waist. Willis screams words I don't comprehend. A necrotic spell whizzes past my ear, dislodging whoever was driving the sword into my chest. There's an awful smell in the air, and the taste of blood lingers on my lips. Willis kneels by my side, screaming, and then I feel nothing. My vision fades to black.

The last sound I hear is the blade in my stomach clanging against the concrete floor as I collapse.

CHAPTER 6

RECOVERY

When I awake, the room I'm in is dark. It smells of dust and furniture polish as if it hasn't been used in decades. I throw off the sheets, trying to figure out my location. The last thing I remember is a sword piercing my back and coming out through my stomach.

My fingers explore my waistline, still feeling the jagged edges where the blade exited. Instead of the sword, my midsection is now covered with a thick layer of gauze. Someone has carefully dressed my wound. It bothers me that I don't know how I ended up here or where "here" even is.

The leather cord of my pandora vial tugs. The clay vial pulses with its rhythm, humming as it heals wounds all over my body. The last thing I want is to lie in bed, but each movement pulls on my stomach and makes me want to cough. I've never felt this much pain in my entire life, which is saying a lot, considering what my father has become.

I search the floor for my discarded clothes.

A muffled groan emerges from the chair beside the canopy bed. There's a soft click as someone lights the gas lamp. My eyes have grown accustomed to the darkness, and the glaring light blinds me. I recognize the familiar sound of a yawn from the man sitting on the ottoman.

"You're finally awake," Grandfather mumbles, rubbing his eyes.

I tense up, wondering why he would watch me while I slept. Is he guarding me or waiting to ask me how I got here? The last thing I remember is a sword piercing my stomach. My throat feels dry, and my voice comes out as a rasp.

"Opa, where am I? Who brought me here? How am I still alive?"

"The Leiche Guard brought you to my home after the field medics attended to you. How do you feel? Do you need more medicine?"

"No," I mumble, tasting a sticky licorice flavor lingering on my teeth.

"How long have I been here?"

"You've been asleep for twenty-four hours. I didn't think you would make it when they brought you here. If we hadn't had your pandora vial from home, I doubt you would have survived until morning."

Opa yawns loudly and rests his long legs on the bed.

"Did you inform someone that you were coming to Ris Norsing?"

"No," I whisper.

Carol was already asleep, and I was so angry when I left that I didn't bother telling my father. I wonder if he even noticed I've been gone for a whole day.

My forehead itches, and I discover stitches on my hairline when I scratch it. I pluck at the loose threads, knowing that the pandora vial has healed the wound.

My grandfather paces the room like a stalking tiger. It makes me uncomfortable since I've seen my dad do the same, usually ending with me getting a thump on the head. I have to say something to break the tension and calm Opa down. So I asked the same question I asked my captors.

"What is an Aabheer?"

Grandfather glares at me, startled. He rubs the stubble on his chin.

"Aabheer is a boy your age who is apprenticing under me. However, where did you hear about Aabheer?"

"The people who took me thought I knew his whereabouts. They seem to think you might have done something to him."

Grandfather dismissively waves his hand.

"As if I could. Aabheer is the son of a councilwoman on the

Eternal Court. He's currently out of the country tracking down a runner."

"What is a runner?"

Grandfather glares at me, taken aback. He rubs his stubbled chin. "A runner is a human who refuses to relinquish necromancy upon death. When their ghost escapes, we refer to them as runners. Aabheer possesses a unique talent for tracking them down. I sent him away to keep him out of my hair."

Inquiring about Aabheer was a mistake on my part. Opa slams his fist down on the nightstand, causing the wooden tabletop to crack under the impact.

"If your captors were inquiring about Aabheer, it confirms he is a spy. I will put an end to this. When Aabheer returns, we will discuss the kind of company he has allowed to slither into my city."

I gaze down at the splintered wood on the nightstand, taking a deep breath to steady my nerves. Damn, the old man is as strong as my dad.

"The Leiche Guards who raided the factory are friends of mine. The one who saved you, a big dark-skinned fellow named Willis, do you remember him?"

I vaguely recall a necromancer kneeling over me. Everything seems foggy in my mind as if it happened to someone else. Yet, the pain in my abdomen ignites, reminding me of everything that happened to me.

I attempt to get out of bed.

For a moment, I fear that the pandora vial might shatter. The clay vial jerks back and forth, pulling at the leather binding around my neck. Opa rushes to my side, offering support.

"You had a sword through your abdomen when you arrived. Return to bed. It would be best if you had time to heal properly. I'll have a ghost bring you fresh clothes, and then we can contact your father."

"Please, no, you can't. Dad doesn't even know I'm here. I didn't bother telling Carol either."

Opa looks at me, startled. He runs his hand through his silver hair. His chapped lips pressed tightly together as he weighed the pros and cons of informing my father.

"We can postpone telling Mortimer what has occurred. You and I have needed to have a conversation for some time."

Opa straightens his trousers and smooths his crumpled dress shirt. The tall grandfather clock in the room begins to chime, displeasing Opa. He glances at the clock's face, wincing.

"I can't believe it's so early. We must contact your father, but first, you should bathe. When you're dressed, meet me in the drawing room. I will explain why I summoned you here."

I am on the verge of protesting, pleading with him not to send a message to my dad. Without uttering another word, he departs, leaving me with a sense of unease in my stomach.

I take out my frustrations on the water closet's handle. Ris Norsing no longer resembles the fantastic fairyland it once seemed. The European-style housing feels cold and foreign. I miss my water closet with its large wooden tub. The gaslights on the chandeliers shine glaringly bright, and mirrors adorn nearly every surface.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the vanity mirror. I whirl around, momentarily not recognizing my reflection.

It feels as if someone else is in the bathroom with me.

My cheek is swollen from where they thrust the dagger through my jaw. My rib cage and stomach are mummified, covered in black and blue welts that dot every exposed patch of skin.

My fingers glide across the gauze on my stomach, cautiously peering underneath. I realize that there are wounds even the magic vials won't heal. A large purple and green gash is in the shape of a sword etched into my skin. The injury radiates heat, and pressing it with my fingers is ill-advised. Pus oozes along the edges, and the smell threatens to make me hurl.

The pandora vial makes a loud whistling noise. I stop probing any further.

I try to reconstruct today's events in my mind.

Those people tried to kill me, and for what? A few spells for some photographs I didn't even have. What kind of spells did they think I possessed? I'd only arrived in Ris Norsing minutes before they got there. Even if I hadn't landed in the River Styx, I still only had one photograph.

The steam fills the bathroom with the disgusting smell of diesel, fish, and ointments. No amount of shampoo or soap breaks through the stench.

Even with the magical healing of the pandora vial, I'll still have a few scars. I push my tongue along the inside of my mouth, searching for the hole left by the dagger. All I taste is dried blood and thick bile. I wonder if I got sick on the way to my grandfather's house.

I hope I didn't puke on the Leiche Guard who saved me. That would be a good way to repay him.

Cleaning up is more of a chore than I first anticipated. Dried blood is all over me. The wounds that made the blood have been mostly absorbed. Every movement I make stretches my stomach making it burn with pain. I scrub and scrub, trying to remove the filth from my hands. It's hard to tell what's a bruise and what's dirt. The sheen of oil from the river still clings all over my skin.

The smell of diesel wafts in the steam. I wish I could open a window to let the smell out, but the big stained glass windows in the bathroom are only for decoration. They won't open.

I keep washing my hair, trying to remove the stench, but it doesn't come out. My mini braids have turned into tangled dreadlocks. I finally give up on re-braiding them, binding the whole black shaggy mess of knots into a single ponytail.

I'll need Carol to fix my hair, but how will I explain what happened to me without her ratting me out to Dad?

There's a knock on the door, and I prepare myself to stare into the frightening visage of a ghost after a moment of silence. I hear the knock again.

"You decent."

“No,” I yell back, not wanting any company.

The tall, dark-eyed man doesn't seem to hear me. He comes on in, a fresh suit draped over his arm. I somewhat recognize him. He must be the Leiche Guard grandfather spoke of.

“We're both guys. It doesn't matter. I got you some clean clothes, but it looks like something a banker would wear. Your grandfather assures me it's what you should dress in.”

I sigh, exasperated, as he lays it over the claw foot tub.

I want to tell him I don't want some Leiche Guard staring at my naked rear end, but I can't yell at the guy who saved my life. It would make me seem ungrateful. Instead, I snap the linen shower curtain closed so I don't have to look at him. I try to push down the acid feeling of the necromancy that aches to be released.

“Steady now, no need to start flinging curses at me. I understand you're pretty beaten up, but you'll pull through since we got to you in time.”

I glare at the shadow through the shower curtain and decide not to look around it. For some reason, my necromancy roars to life. Each of the little hairs on the back of my neck stands up. The magic is ready to start burning beds and igniting Opa's oriental rugs in flame.

The last thing I want to do is lose control of my powers before a Leiche Guard.

I start counting tiles in the water closet. The counting does the trick of settling my nerves. When I reach thirteen, I can choke down my unspent magic.

I snap the shower curtain open and give Willis a dull glare.

He is not the Ris Norsing gentlemen I would normally think of. Willis has a strong jaw and large, well-worn hands. The scar over his eye is covered up today.

I wonder how he did it.

My first impression of him is he seems too cordial to be a member of the Leiche Guard. He looks like someone you'd expect to be playing a saxophone in a poorly lit ragtime club. Willis is not

wearing the gray leather Leiche Guard armor, either. Instead, he has on a dark green uniform. It looks like something the human military might wear.

That bugs me.

We charon don't have armies. The Eternal Court makes all the decisions for the charon and human worlds, even if humanity has been left in the dark.

"Can this wait till I'm done showering? I'm not even dressed yet." I ask.

I'm surprised by the irritation in my voice. Willis doesn't seem to mind or even notice. He drops the seat down on the commode and sits down. Willis gives me an odd expression before running his fingers through his pitch-black jheri curls.

"You're a fifteen-year-old kid. You are probably scared shitless of talking to a Leiche Guard. I'm not part of those degenerates who tore you up. So that you understand, those weren't members of the guard. If the guard had been interrogating you, you would probably be dead now."

"That's a real comfort," I mumble under my breath. I turn off the faucet, realizing he's not leaving soon.

"Is this an official Leiche Guard inquiry, or are you collecting information for the Eternal Court?"

I'm not angry with Willis, but everything I say to him is nasty. My tongue has a mind of its own.

"Your gramps is waiting for you. Can you tell me if your captors said what they wanted? The Eternal Court will ask me all kinds of questions if you don't want to end up in front of your dad in an official inquiry. I need to know everything that's happened to you from the moment you landed in Ris Norsing."

Standing before my Father and the Eternal Court is the last thing I want. Luckily, my dad went on a bender and is still passed out in the lab. Maybe he hasn't even noticed I'm gone. Either way, I spit out things in no coherent order.

"My father disapproves of me seeing Opa. I tried to use an

etheric transfer spell. Somehow I blotched up the necromancy and fell into the

River Styx. After being hauled on board a zeppelin, those people wearing Leiche Guard uniforms took me to a warehouse.”

A loud bang comes from the bedroom door, but it doesn’t open. Willis’s nose wrinkles into a snarl as a ghost floats into the room. “You again. You can’t keep your nose out of other people’s business. I’m questioning the boy about his attackers. Go away, spooky.”

The ghost ignores Willis and heads to the bed to straighten the covers. I recognize the flowing blond hair and blue skin. She’s the woman who darted in front of us in the alley. Her jaw appears dislocated. I’m having problems seeing past the strangely long mouth that’s trapped her face in an eternal scream. The ghost stares at me with dull gray eyes. I realize whatever death has disfigured her this way has given her a limited amount of facial expressions.

“If you remember anything, Faust, you must tell me. I’m on your side. You don’t want your old man to see you torn up like this. I’ve heard Mortimer Thaed has quite a temper.”

Buddy, you don’t know half of it. I make no effort to speak. My eyes don’t leave the spirit straightening the room. She bobs up and down, wading through the air as if it were made of water. It’s peaceful and somehow relaxing.

“The people who captured me were searching for photographs.

For some reason, they thought I’d have a bunch of them. The little girl complained Aldrich was messing with their soul collecting. They didn’t have any necromancy to harvest, and the Eternal Court was to blame. They didn’t seem all too educated. The girl was stupid enough to dangle a shide in front of my face. She should’ve known not to let me read the writing on it.”

The ghostly maid is moving in and out of my vision. She’s having difficulty holding her form. I guess she hasn’t been a ghost for long. I grab the other side of the bed sheet, trying to help her make the bed.

“You don’t have to clean up after me. I can do it myself,” I say

loud enough for only her to hear me.

The ghost hand chops my pillows, fluffing away the indentation. She moves on to straightening the nightstands. When I glance at Willis, he quickly scrawls things in a notepad.

“So unsanctioned necromancy use, abduction, torture, impersonating a Leiche Guard, intention to incite mayhem. That about covers it, or is there anything else?”

I gasped, dumbfounded. How did he come up with all that from what I told him? Any of those crimes could land you in the Asylum of The Damned. The gravity of what I’ve told him sinks in. The people who hurt me will be sent to the AOTD. I try to decide if I feel right about sending those people to an inescapable prison.

The bedtime stories from my childhood painted it as a horrible place where they do shock treatments, and lobotomies, to cure the criminal element. It’s a place where evil charon go to die.

I’m still angry they tried to kill me.

Those people probably deserve a few volts to the brain; it might even be an improvement.

“Faust... Faust.”

I shake off my stupor, realizing I must have ignored what Willis asked.

“I’m sorry I’m not myself today?”

Willis eyes me peculiarly and gets up from his seat on the commode. “No, this is more than enough. It would be best if you rested more. It wouldn’t hurt if you had your grandfather send for a doctor. The pandora vials can only heal so much. Some more sleep would probably fix you right up. You hear that spooky. The boy will be climbing back into bed. You’re wasting your afterlife.”



My maid opens the door for Willis. Her eyes shift to the hallway.

I can't get over the way her jaw is stretched. Bones don't move like that. I keep staring at her extended chin and long neck. The ghost raises her boney wrist and points to the hall, demanding Willis to leave.

A breathy voice saying, "Get Out," fills the empty halls.

"Guess I better leave before she makes the walls start bleeding."

Willis snorts at the ghost in contempt. I can tell he's not fond of

being told what to do by the dead. I've had years of getting my rear handed to me by Ms. Wang. I'm glad the ghosts in Ris Norsing don't let the charon walk all over them. After all, the netherworld belongs to the ghosts. We're just the janitorial staff set up to clean up after them.

As Willis leaves the door slams closed by itself. I smile up at the maid.

"Nice trick, I appreciate it. I didn't want to talk to him."

My fingers run through my messed-up braids, which look more like dreadlocks. The ghost bats my hands away, and she begins re-braiding my messy black hair.

I wish I could ask her name and how she got to the state where she couldn't speak. It would be rude of me and probably a painful memory. The ghost floats to the bathroom vanity and hands me a mirror to check my hair. She's woven long conduit ties into my braids, making them stand straight up in one of those new cyberpunk styles you see the cool kids wearing. I stare at my reflection appreciatively.

I may be battered beyond all recognition, but I feel more myself. My father would completely disapprove of my new hairstyle. For that reason alone, I love it.

"You got a name?"

The ghost turns and rubs her hand along the mirror. It makes the sound of fingernails moving down a chalkboard. Deep scratches form on the mirrored panel. I trace my fingers over the cracks spelling the word Eldy. I turn to thank the ghost, but the looking glass drops to the floor when I do. Eldy has vanished, and the door to my room is open again.

CHAPTER 7

BONEYARD

As I make my way to the parlor, I bump into several more charon wearing the same military uniform as Willis. The place is abuzz with soldiers, and I feel their stares. I can tell by the body language in the hallway and the way they whisper into their hands that I'm being judged. It's hard to tell what they say because they keep slipping from English to French and German. The odd mix of dialects put me on edge.

The old nationalities are meaningless to someone my age.

There's no need to hold on to archaic customs from the ancient empires. The Eternal Court has said so. These judgmental bastards probably think I can't understand them if they don't speak English or Xenease. My mother considered herself European. She brought me up speaking four languages. Until now, I've never needed to know German except for a few odd phrases Opa slips up and uses.

I catch most of what the soldiers say as I pass the halls.

"That poor boy of Aldrich's, tortured by terrorists. Did you hear his father is a dragon and a drunkard too?"

"Everyone knows Mortimer has been a bit daft after his wife died."

The two of them chuckle deeply.

I want to correct those idiots. My mom might still be alive.

Mother could be working for the Eternal Court in secrecy, hidden from everyone.

I don't waste my breath on the gossipers. After all, to them, I'm only some half-blood kid who happens to be Aldrich's grandson. A little bit of sensationalism to fill their dull day.

I find myself shuffled into the billiard room by armed Leiche Guards. The scent of old cigar smoke lingers in the air. Grandfather doesn't look up at me as I make my way between his wing-backed chairs. Opa looks absorbed, squinting through his monocle at a blueprint. He seems to be using the billiard table as a makeshift desk.

“Opa?”

Grandfather turns to me, startled. He shoves a few papers over the blueprints.

“Faust, good, you're dressed. It appears the pandora vial has also reduced most of the swelling.”

I intend to ask him about the uniforms, but when Opa straightens his back to peer away from his map, I see Opa is also wearing military-style garb. Atop his crisply cut silver hair is a billed parade cap with a moniker of a rearing stallion. It's part of our family crest, but now it seems to be a part of the military garb for the Ris Norsing Leiche Guard. Grandfather doesn't seem to notice how uncomfortable I am.

He hands me a plate of breakfast which has long gone cold, and points to different colored pins jammed into a wall-size map.

“Impressive, is it not? This map was commissioned to show all the continents after the shift. It even has an overlay showing each of the charon territories.”

I'm in no mood to listen to a geography lesson.

Dad will probably be sending a vulture for me any minute now. What if Opa didn't keep his promise? What if he told my father what happened?

I try to swallow down some of the cold food, but I'm not hungry. Opa isn't the least bit concerned. He stabs a green pin into the map, marking his piece of the world.

A knock on the door breaks off my grandfather's jabbering.

Willis lets himself in before anyone can answer. The soldier is carrying a big guitar case. Or maybe it's some sort of horn. I'm not musically inclined, so I can't tell.

“I have the traitors lined up in the dining room, General Maher. Do you want us to go ahead without you?”

“No,” Opa barks.

Willis’s casual demeanor slips away.

“We’ll wait for you, sir. Might I suggest sending Faust into town for a streusel?”

I can’t keep the frown from creasing my face. Willis doesn’t know me. I’m a little insulted that he thinks he can send me on some trip to the bakery like a stupid kid. I’m wondering why he isn’t wearing his Leiche Guard attire.

The Leiche Guards from my territory always wear their uniforms. They have beautiful red samurai armor and dragon-shaped masks. It symbolizes pride and authority over all the Asian charon.

I’m appalled when my grandfather agrees with this flannel mouth.

“Faust, if you would be so kind to go to the cemetery behind the house. There is something out there I feel you need to see. I’ll join you after I discuss a few things with our friend from the Leiche Guard.”

Friend? Willis is not my friend. He’s some stranger who saved me. Some awkward man who seems way too comfortable roaming my grandfather’s house. Before I can make any objections, Willis shuffles me from the room, shutting Opa inside, and he says in a whisper.

“Your Opa doesn’t realize this might take a little while. I bet he hasn’t even given you any spending money while you’re exploring the town.”

“It’s not like I’ll need any in the cemetery,” I say sarcastically, but Willis doesn’t even notice.

He shoves a handful of hell notes with my grandfather’s face on them into my hand.

The soldier’s golden brown eyes are feigning concern.

I’ve nothing but contempt for this man.

I fold the money into my pocket. I reluctantly push back through soldiers and Leiche Guard loitering the halls. I want to stay and listen and find out why those people tried to kill me. Everyone is shooing me from the house.

Damn it, I'm not a little kid.

I'm about to leave the front door when I hear the soft sound of sobbing from one of the rooms. My morbid curiosity makes me peek my head into the dining hall.

Beneath the crystal chandelier is a row of imprisoned charon. Fifteen of my captors stand in front of a long dining table set with the finest china. Their masks and Leiche Guard disguises have been stripped away. They now wear brown jumpers and the same shackles that once bound me.

An overwhelming feeling of satisfaction washes over me.

Each of my captor's faces is beaten bloody. They all have a nearly identical wound on their cheek. It appears to be the same knife wound I got. The only difference is theirs are still fresh. This must be retribution from the Leiche Guard.

Maybe Willis isn't so bad after all.

A satisfied smile crooks my lips. No one has been left unspoiled. Even the youngest girl has a stream of blood dripping down her jawline. The others are ignoring her crying. Her arms and legs are black and blue.

Blood drips into her eyes from a long cut along her hairline. Without their pandora vials, they can't heal themselves properly.

To add insult to injury, a pandora vial rests on the mahogany dining table, sitting as a place setting in front of each set of dishes.

It must be torturous knowing your salvation is within arms reach from you. Knowing if you move a muscle, you will fall prey to the Leiche Guard and their powerful necromancy spells. I can guess what's running through their minds by how intensely they stare at the table.

Willis comes behind me and knocks his bulbous saxophone case into my knees, making me buckle over in the hall.

“You shouldn’t be in here. That’s official Leiche Guard business.”

He nudges me with the case again as he closes the dining room door.

He gives me an odd look, and he fiddles with my hair. “What the heck did you do to your head? You’ve got electric wire woven through your braids?”

“Eldy did it for me. Cool, right?” Willis snorts in amusement.

“No wonder she’s trapped down here. She can’t leave her old personality behind. Enough stalling, you. Time to get going.”

My eyes wander to the dining room door. Willis is barring my entrance.

“The short girl, she’s about the same age as me. What will happen to her?”

“Nothing you need to worry your ratty head about. Bollocks, we need to take you to a proper barber. I think your braids might be longer than my sister’s.”

I roll my eyes.

Willis doesn’t so much as lead me as shove me out the front door of Opa’s house.

“You don’t have time for the bakery now. Your gramps will be along in a minute. I need him to sign off on a few things.”

I stomp down the stairs taking two steps at a time. That man acts too familiar to me. I leave the manor muttering a few choice swear words under my breath. Why the heck are they shooin’ me out? Surely they can tell I don’t want to leave. Why would Opa choose Willis, of all people, to be his second? Is it because he can fight? Or is it something politically connected with the Eternal Court?

The creaking of a wrought iron fence alerts me I’m not alone. There’s a whole family of charon in their Sunday best making their way to the house. The entire happy little family is burdened with parcels. The group’s father is trying to open the gate but is mashing the fresh blossoms he holds. I run over to help before he ruins his bouquet.

The gate is not rusty, but it's heavy. The family, with all their fresh flowers and packages, are carrying way too many things. The father gives me a quick nod of thanks before heading inside with his wife. The children obediently follow behind them.

"Where does this lead?" I call out.

The youngest boy yells back to me. "It goes to the city's bone orchard."

I cock my head, trying to decipher his words. I stand there looking stupid until I figure out he's talking about the local cemetery. I follow the family through the thicket of aspen and low-hanging vines, wondering if there will be fruit trees in the cemetery.

Back home, cemeteries always sit on hillsides. This is how it's been done for thousands of years so our ancestors can overlook the living from their burial mounds. Like everything in Ris Norsing, things are completely different from Xeno. Towering above us, the trees seemed to stretch endlessly toward the sky. Had I not seen the family struggling with the rod iron gate. I wouldn't have ever known a cemetery was hidden in the forest. It is strange to me that the people of Ris Norsing must not want to be reminded of their dead. Why would they hide them behind a fence and dense pine grove?

One positive thing about the cemetery is that it sure is pretty.

The soul lights dance in the high branches. They seem content, darting through the base of trees and then looping back up into the pine needles. They remind me of will 'o' wisps, the way they move from tree to tree. For the first time since I've visited this foreign country, I feel at home and in my element.

In the clearing up ahead, big Gothic statues adorn almost every vault.

Life-size marble angels stare down on their loved ones. It's probably a little bit Goth of me, but I like this place. We don't have statue gardens honoring the dead in Xeno. This is a befitting final resting place for a necromancer. The trees wall the individual tombs

and vaults, offering privacy to the bereaved.

The family I followed here is a little north of me. I see the family standing before a grave, their shoulders slumped. I wander the cemetery looking at the statues, and the names on the plaques, until I stop in front of a big mausoleum. It's much larger than every other tomb here. The owner must have paid a fortune for the polished marble and alabaster carvings. On each side of the vault are huge statues of the grim reaper. Or I assume they are reapers because they are grasping crossed scythes, barring entry into the tomb. It's a spectacular monument, probably created for a whole family of charon. I read the name on the tomb, and cold sweat runs down my neck.



‘Thaed.’ It’s my name or, rather, my last name. I reread the inscription trying to make it read differently. The text doesn’t change. Here lies Calypso Thaed, beloved daughter, mother, and wife. May she be happier in her next life than in this one?

I pace. I’m trying hard not to stare at my mother’s memorial.

Why is this here? It feels sacrilegious to be standing in front of a tomb I didn’t know about. Is this what Opa wanted me to see? Does he want me to see my mother is dead?

My throat feels sore, and the rest of me feels feverish.

My mother has a two-story mausoleum in tribute to her. I didn’t even attend her funeral. She must have had one. My father never came to this shrine. The old lush never told me or my sisters it even existed.

Even with all the deaths I’ve witnessed, nothing has prepared me for this. What exactly am I supposed to do? I search the cemetery for answers.

The other family has spread a blanket a few rows down from me. They brought food, flowers, and incense to honor their deceased. I watch them clean off the shrine and remove the old incense. Offering prayers to whatever god they believed in.

Maybe I should’ve brought flowers? Perhaps incense? I don’t feel grief. I should be sad, right? Instead, I’m panicking. I frantically try to find something to do with no success. So I read the inscription on my mother’s plaque again.

It looks new. Is it new? Could she have just died?

Unlike the other shrines, no grass clippings or old incense needs to be cleaned off. Probably because this cemetery is so close to my grandfather’s house, Opa must visit this place often. That’s probably why the grave looks so clean.

I bite down on my knuckles to keep from yelling aloud. I feel betrayed. I’m not sure who I’m angry at.

Why did I come here?

Did I want this, to see a grave for my mother? To have my grandfather tell me what happened to her because my drunken

mess of a father wouldn't?

My fury ebbs into something else. My anger reaches into the graves, finding the bodies buried in the ground. A rumble comes from the earth beneath me as if the very dirt is growling. No one else seems to notice. I guess what I'm hearing is my necromancy. I wish I had written down a few shides right now. It would feel good to push the anger into something.

My sisters and I should've been allowed to attend the funeral. I don't care how angry my father is with Opa. We should've been allowed to come.

The words of the men in the hallway sink in. Those men knew my mom was dead. Did they get to come to the funeral while I didn't?

What could my old man be thinking that would make him not come? He loved Mom more than anyone. He's been drunk since the day she left. Even worse than usual lately.

Wait.

Dad knew. Dad must know what happened. That's why he's been... I make no movements.

Deep down, I suspected she was dead. Until now, I still had a glimmer of hope that Mom was being hidden away somewhere. Maybe the Eternal Court had whisked her up because she was unhappy with my father. Perhaps she was a spy working for the government. Maybe she was hiding from us in an asylum. Anything seemed better than knowing I can never see her again.

I keep rereading the name and the date on the brass plaque. Hoping I've somehow read it wrong. The mausoleum plaque continues to read the same, no matter how much I try to wish it away.

CALYPSO THAED

BELOVED DAUGHTER, MOTHER, AND WIFE.

APRIL 10, 1939 - APRIL 6, 2024.

CHAPTER 8

THE EMPTY COFFIN

No, it's not real. There's a miss print on the tombstone. It says Mom was born on April 10, 1939, and died on April 6, 2024.

But that's impossible.

My mom was young and beautiful when she was taken from us. She had long, platinum blond hair like my sister Geraldine's. She has a slim, sharp nose same as Carol's. My mother had been ripped away in the prime of her youth. My mother didn't even have a wrinkle on her face. I fumbled with the math in my head, trying to figure out how old my mother was.

When Grandfather rests his hand on my shoulder, I yelp out loud. The other family looks over at us in surprise.

"I didn't mean to startle you."

A white linen handkerchief is wrapped around Opa's hand. Little specks of blood are coming off his knuckles. Opa buries the cloth in his pocket and twists a large ring over his scraped fingers.

"This cemetery must be quite unnerving to you with all its statues and Gothic antiquities."

Gothic antiquities, what the hell is he talking about statues for? This is Mom's grave...say something, you wrinkled old man. These words stay locked inside me.

"This tomb...is Mother actually buried here?"

Opa finds his shoes more interesting than our conversation.

He stares at them, unable to answer me.

"Your father wouldn't allow you to attend her memorial service. He can be so pigheaded when he's mad. Did he even bother to ask you or your sisters if you wanted to come?"

“No,” I whisper. My voice has grown raspy.

My hands tighten into fists as I look at my last name. I hate him. I hate my father for this. I will never forgive him. Grandfather doesn't seem to notice how furious I am. He pulls me into a hug burying his face in my neck. I want to throw him halfway across the cemetery. As mad as I am, I know I could. It would only take one or two martial arts moves. I could grab him by the shoulders. Fall back on the ground and roll him into the throw.

I'm going to do it.

I don't want him touching me. I don't want anyone ever to touch me again. I feel my insides grow cold as the old man hugs me.

“I'm sorry you had to find out this way. I'm a coward. I couldn't tell you before. I've wanted you kids to come here for a long time. I couldn't find the words. Your father...”

Opa's face is beet red. His eyes clenched shut. His stiff military hat falls to the ground.

“This shouldn't have happened to our family. You and your sisters are so young. Your mother was so vibrant, so full of life. I'd do anything to see Calypso one more time. Anything.”

It feels like I've turned into one of those marble statues looking down on us. I've never seen Opa cry.

Real men don't cry, according to my father.

Opa is sobbing, his arms squeezing me so tight I can barely breathe.

“No parent should have to see their child pass before them. It's probably worse for you, being that she is your mother and Mortimer is the way he is.”

I'm still thinking about throwing him across the cemetery or choking Opa. For some reason, my hands have a mind of their own, and I stroke Opa's back, not knowing what else to do.

Words fumble out of my lips. “I should've stopped the Leiche Guard from taking her. I didn't even understand why they took her away. No one ever explained anything to me.”

This is the answer I've been looking for. My mother is dead, and

here is her tomb. I'm too angry at my father to grieve. The other part of me is too overwhelmed to process knowing she's not missing anymore. I can go home and tell Carol she's buried in Opa's cemetery. Mother isn't lost to us.

"I had a splendid service for your mother, lots of flowers, and people came to pay their respects. The whole Leiche Guard came. Afterward, I didn't receive the closure I was looking for. When the funeral took place, I entombed an empty coffin. I didn't have her body at the time. In all essence, this elaborate crypt might seem useless to someone your age. I wasn't ready to let her go, and I'm still not."

My heart drops out of my chest. The moment of peace I experienced vanished. My mother isn't buried in this cemetery. This stone that bears her name is little more than a marker for where she should be. I feel the corpses twist in their graves beneath my feet. My heartbeat is thumping in my ears. I bite my tongue to keep myself from saying something stupid.

Why did you show me this? Why am I here? I want to scream at him. Berate Opa for celebrating a missing corpse. I wait, seething in my anger.

"Faust, I didn't bring you here to mourn an empty grave. I brought you here to show you what could happen. Finally, I have a lead on where your mother might be. That will not do us a bit of good if we are only retrieving her body. There are rumors of research that can resurrect the dead. We may not need to lay her to rest."

The only word that enters my head is zombies. All this has happened, so you can tell me about the stupid zombie study. I imagine my poor mother with green skin, drooling and staggering about mindlessly. I am appalled.

"Not zombies, Reincarnation. A second chance at life. The last thing your mother was working on was hiding a doctor from the Eternal Court. She took this woman, Doctor Wu, to Xeno to hide her. Ironically, Doctor Wu was working on blurring the line

between living and dead. According to your mother's dossiers, she's perfected a technique that can resurrect the deceased. Do you know what this means, Faust? We can have her back."

My tongue feels swollen, and I can't swallow. My mother died trying to hide a doctor attempting to resurrect the dead.

It's a revolting idea.

Bringing back the dead is a perversion of how life and death should work. It's wrong. I want no part of these ethereal fantasies. These are the clinging hopes of someone who has lost everything. I finally understood why my father had forbidden us from seeing Opa. I try to look Opa in the eyes to gauge what level he believes this yarn he's telling me. The old fox keeps staring at the ground.

"I need my family back. You, your sisters, your mother. I can't keep drowning myself in the affairs of the Eternal Court. I've grown bored trying to find new ways to explore necromancy. There has to be more out there than soul collecting and the endless pursuits of spell craft."

Opa chews on his lower lip, not looking up at me. "Your silence speaks loads to me. You will not help me, will you, son?"

Staring at my mother's empty memorial, how can I say no to him?

I hold my breath, worried about what I might say if I speak right now. If I do nothing, my mother's body may be entombed here. Then what will I do? Spend my days mourning a grave I can never visit? My voice comes out throaty and shows more eagerness than I want.

"This process of reincarnating the dead. What is it?"

Opa's head jerks in surprise and a mixture of emotions cross his lined face. He's about to answer me when a series of quick pops tear my attention away. It was loud. The vultures are all squawking out calls of warning.

A mess of vultures bolt from the widow's walk of grandfather's house and search the cemetery grounds for a new place to sit.

The other family I followed up here is also gawking at my

grandfather's mansion.

"Was that a Tommy gun?" The little girl asks foolishly. I know Opa can hear them, but he doesn't object.

He doesn't even look at his house. It's as if he knows what's transpired. The little girl's father doesn't tell her no either. His lips twist into disapproval as the vultures swoop into the cemetery, searching for shelter.

"Grandma might be a little under the weather today. Maybe we should have our picnic at home."



The kid's mother looks at Opa, nodding a quick yes. The color is drained out of her face. She quickly gathers up the picnic basket and the blanket. Opa doesn't move or respond.

The Leiche Guard only intended to interrogate those bastards and haul them to the Asylum of The Damned. I grab Opa by the shoulders and give him a good hard shake. Bringing him out of his stupor.

"What was that? That other charon said it sounded like a gun."

Those poor people keep turning worried glances at Grandfather. What do they think we'll do, fall upon them and slap them with a few necromancy spells?

"The Leiche Guard must be done interrogating your captors. Willis thought it would be frowned upon by the Eternal Court if I got involved. You don't have to be afraid of them anymore, Faust. They've been dealt with."

Dealt with... I didn't want them to be killed.

I wanted those worms to squirm in front of the Eternal Court.

Nobody should've died. That girl was probably younger than me. How can the Leiche Guards execute a little kid in good conscience? I glare at my grandfather.

Opa's knees seem to be giving him a problem. He takes my hand, leaning into me to help himself to his feet. His blood-red ears stand out against his crisply cut silver hair. I feel numb inside. Everything in the world feels upside down. My Opa is a hardened man, a natural-born leader. His eyes threaten tears. The Leiche Guard is supposed to defend the empire from evil necromancers, not from little girls who fall into the wrong crowd. Opa chokes down more sobs before blowing his nose on his pocket square.

"Can you find your way to the Zeppelin yard by yourself? I need to collect a few things before we can start our journey. I don't want you coming with me."

What? You don't want me seeing those people sprawled on your dining room floor, dead.

I won't repeat this to Opa. I watch him hobble out of the cemetery. The other charon family jumps out of his path to avoid him. I mumble a quick apology and begin chasing after him. Darting through the trees, all of which are swarmed with vultures. Their beady eyes stare down at me accusingly. I can't make my way through the trees fast enough. Opa has vanished like one of the ghosts. I can't catch up to him.

As I make my way from the cemetery, I can't help but notice the Leiche Guard gathered at my Grandfather's door.

The faceless soldiers bring in stretchers and other equipment I don't recognize. My stomach churns as the first body bag is wheeled onto the porch.

A quick memory invades my mind. Mom was wheeled away on a stretcher. I don't want to imagine her in one of those black bags with silver zippers.

Somewhere in the line of stretchers is that little girl. She was executed because of me. It bothers me that I can't think of anything I could have done to make events turn out differently. I don't want to stand and watch her wheeled away in a body bag, so I run from the manor. I dodge through the busy streets, weaving through the Ris Norsing charon and ghosts. I won't stop until my muscles burn. I'm heaving and panting when I reach the shoreline and can run no more.

Here the river Styx beats against an outcropped rock, churning the surf into sprays of water that stink of diesel and oil. When I finally look up to see where I am, I find I'm already at the zeppelin yard.



The dirigible yard is bustling with activity. The spirits drift by as I stand, unmoving, not noticing me.

Beyond the city aqueducts, a fully loaded zeppelin lifts into the air. I exhale a hard breath trying to calm my nerves. I watch the dirigible being guided over the river with a tethered line that the charon aboard the zeppelin use to pull it into a vast chasm of golden light.

This feels familiar. We have a similar spirit transportation project in Xeno. Only our ghosts use ferries to travel to the afterlife, not anything as flashy as the dirigibles. My necromancy has pulled me here. It drags anyone with an ounce of magic to their name to this spot. I feel flakes of invisible magic lifting off me into the vortex.

Pure golden light swirls in a whirlpool above the city. The ghosts on the ship wait for the pulleys to drag the zeppelin close enough to release their souls and let them walk into the light. There is something metaphysically different about this place. I doubt even the most scholarly necromancers can explain the whirlpool of spinning light in the sky.

The swirling points of life have a hypnotic effect on me. It tugs deep inside me, whispering everything is right in the world.

Whatever is on the other side of that light is a mystery to my kind. I can tell it's good from the warm feeling I get.

The dirigible crew on board the ship scuttles to the other side of the vessel, staying far away from the vortex. They wait in silence for ghosts to step into the light. We charon, can't ever let the light touch us. We're damned until our deaths to be spectators of this miraculous achievement of nature. What irritates me most is my mother won't ever become a part of whatever happy ending is on the other side. As far as I can understand, when we die, we return to the earth as worm food, and no more thought is given to us.

Unlike the ghosts. The ghosts seem to have everything. An eruption of applause and goodbyes bellows from the dock.

Streamers are launched into the air. Ghosts aboard the zeppelin kiss their goodbyes away.

The spirits left waiting on the docks will probably never meet them again. The spirits accept this. It seems depressing. The deceased who don't have Reincarnation Orders will continue to be stuck here in Ris Norsing. That is their fate until they receive a stamp from a charon bureaucrat. Maybe some of the spooks know this already.

The ones standing before the Reincarnation Bureau are giving me dirty looks. I hear them grumbling about how long it's taking to submit a few forms. They'd probably lash out at any charon at this moment. I can't say I blame them. Everyone wants to go into the light, including me.

I can do nothing for these lost spooks. My job is to bring them

into the netherworld, not to help them cross over. Necromancers associate little with the dead after we bring them into the Nether After.

Though I've always considered myself the exception to this rule, I try to follow up on the spirits I collect to ensure they feel more at home until they get their affairs in order. I've never met another charon who does this.

My father and the other charon don't see the world my way. They believe all apparitions to be malicious. They think the spooks hate us because we're in control of the netherworld. Most of the spooks are nice when you get to know them. Without ghosts like Mrs. Wang, my sister and I would probably go hungry. I've always gotten along with the myriads who take care of the house and our laundry.

For some reason, angry-looking specters are exiting the Reincarnation building. A thin, militant-looking charon woman with thick spectacles and ebony skin follows behind with a megaphone. She has a good size sign tucked under her arm.

The charon bureaucrat plopped the sign in front of the building and looked over the line, projecting her shrill voice as loudly as possible.

"Due to a state of emergency, we have shortened service hours. All ghosts are instructed to return to their homes. The Department of Reincarnation Orders is currently closed. We will reopen on Tuesday, August seventeenth, and resume our regular hours of operation Monday through Friday, Eight AM to Five PM. Please view this time as a holiday. We look forward to serving you soon."

There's a loud groan from the ghosts in the line as they disperse. The specters don't loiter about long. The sound of leather boots marching in unison fills the streets. Leiche Guard in their full gray leather armor and cowls ushers the spirits away.

"Move along. Please tell everyone you meet to return to their homes."

The Leiche Guard clears the zeppelin yard of both ghosts and

charon.

I realize how suspicious I must look standing here alone. I'm the only oriental kid here. A few resistant dock workers are trying to determine why some half-breed child from Xeno is getting special treatment. I'm debating if I should return to my grandfather's house when I am struck in the side with a carpet bag.

"Eldy?"

The skeletal ghost pushes the bag at me again. Her wispy long gown clings to her bare ribcage. She looks soaking wet, drowning.

"What's this for?" I asked Eldy, forgetting she couldn't answer me with her strung-out jaw.

The spirit holds out her twig-like arms and points to the dirigible. The Leiche Guard is surrounding. "Go..." Eldy rasps.

CHAPTER 9

ZEPPELIN ONE

All the dock workers are being shooed from the airships. Huge caches of weapons are being pulled onboard the zeppelin. I can see the tops of four or five Maxim guns and several crates marked as explosives.

Blood red sails are rising on the ship, bearing my grandfather's crest of a rearing stallion. The sails fill with the wind like bright standards of war. At this moment, I'm questioning what I've gotten myself into.

I look to the ghost bobbing up and down in the air for support.

"You want me to go help the people onboard the dirigible?"

Eldy's jaw tries to move. No noise comes out of her outstretched mouth.

"G..G..Gooooo." The ghost wails. Frigid drowning death crawls over my skin. Every necromancer in the area turns around, staring at Flossie and me. I try to get her to calm down, but she bellows again.

"Gooo." Her voice is blood-curdling. One of the Leiche Guards starts approaching me. He has a sword in hand.

"Eldy, you need to get out of here. Something ain't right, and I'm worried one of the guards may hurt you."

I'm worried they may hurt me too. Everyone wearing a uniform is too busy grabbing containers and hauling them on board. Meanwhile, an out-of-breath necromancer starts to bum-rush Eldy. His spell is twinkling in his palm.

"Eldy, you need to scram."

"Necromancer Faust, we finally found you. Please hurry. We're

in a state of emergency. You need to board that zeppelin.”

Another of the military goons grabs the carpetbag. He has a good size bruise on his jaw and a thick scar running across his nose.

I turn to ask Eldy to leave, but the spirit is gone.

The soldier with the bruised jaw tries to take me by the arm. I twist free of him quickly.

“I’m not letting you take me anywhere until you tell me where my grandfather is.”

The soldier seems surprised. He shrinks away from me, noticing the shift in my aura. Smart man. He probably knows I’ll start flinging spells at him if he doesn’t stop pissing me off.

“Sir, there has been an assassination attempt on Necromancer Aldrich Maher’s life. We ask you to wait on board for your own safety.”

An assassination attempt on Opa? My heart skips a beat. I was with him only moments ago. He said he needed to collect a few things.

What could have happened?

I hear running. Willis and a group of soldiers are dragging a gurney to the dirigible scaffolds. The tall pockmarked man barks orders at the other men in uniform.

“Everyone lift.” I watch them carry the gurney up the metal rungs.

“Willis, what’s happening?” I shout over the noise.

Willis looks sweaty and confused. The ebony-skinned soldier turns and stares at me in horror.

“Someone take my spot carrying Herr Maher.”

The soldier charges and grabs me, throwing me over his muscular shoulders. It must look awkward for a grown man like Willis to fling a teenage boy over his shoulder. I’m stupid embarrassed that he’s carrying me. The bruised guy carrying the carpet bag whips up the ramp after us without a word. Willis doesn’t waste time climbing the scaffold. He hops aboard the dirigible as if I weigh nothing.

“Why weren’t you on board the ship yet?”

“I don’t know you, people, that’s why. First, those phony Leiche Guards. Now Opa’s been hurt. How do I know who to trust?”

“It’s my job to keep you and Maher safe. I’m not going to have Aldrich’s punk-ass grandson blemishing my perfect record.”

Willis takes a deep breath and grits his teeth.

“Next time I tell you to run, you run, you creepy little idiot.”

I flinch, thinking he’s about to hit me with one of those bear paws he calls hands, but he doesn’t. Willis slaps the cabin door open, dropping into the zeppelin’s cabin. He plops me onto a fainting couch and waits till the other soldiers haul Opa’s gurney downstairs.

“Stupid grunts, be a little gentler. That’s Aldrich Maher you’re transporting,” Willis yells as he takes over, carrying the front of the stretcher.

Opa groans loudly, pushing off the sheet on top of him. I get my first look at his wounds. The whole front of his jacket and shirt is red. Someone has loosened his tie to work on his chest. There’s a huge gaping hole in him. It’s gushing out blood.

“Faust. Where is Faust? Where is my grandson?”

Opa’s bloody hand falls from the gurney. None of the guards notice as he seems to reach out into the abyss.

“Don’t worry sir, we found your grandson. Everything is secured.”

Instantly, I’m at Opa’s bedside, pushing my way through the soldiers and doctors. I grip his wrinkled hand, lowering my face close to his.

“I’m here. What’s happened Opa?”

“Sir, we need the coordinates for wherever you want us to go.”

Opa struggles in bed. He spits up a mouth full of blood. His olive green pants are smudged with brown and red. He’s been badly hurt. These wounds are from no ordinary weapon. Necromancy, dark and squirming is engulfing him.

“Who cursed him?” I yell to the guards.

“We don’t know,” Willis says exasperated.

“Sir, I don’t think the pandora vial is regenerating quickly enough.

He’s losing too much blood. He needs a transfusion.”

“Then roll up your damn sleeve and give him your blood. Do I have to do everything?”

Willis grabs a soldier by the collar and yells in his face. “You tell those assholes upstairs to shove off. I want this ship in the air and out of the capital city. If someone gives you the impression they don’t belong, kill ‘em.”

That poor grunt might have wet himself. He stumbles out of the cabin, tripping several times on the stairs. Willis pushes another uniformed guy into a chair.

“What are you waiting for? Roll up your sleeve Corporal.”

One of the medics gets a foot of long gold tubing and connects it to a needle the size of a marinade injector. They plunge the needle into the corporal’s arm. I turn my head away and try to prop Opa up so he can breathe easier. There is a rattle in his chest. I push a few red-stained pillows under Opa’s neck and try to ignore that they’re covered in blood.

“Who did this to you Opa? I can etheric transfer to Ris Norsing and track them down.”

“No way in hell,” Willis yells over the doctors.

“You’re staying right here with me and your gramps. You’re not going to run about the capital alone. It’s not safe.”

Willis’ necromancy fills the cabin, and his eyes glow bright green. The gas lamps in the cabin flicker as the zeppelin lurches upwards—the dirigible creaks and moans as we increase in speed. I can tell this ship wasn’t made for flying. Until today it’s been part of some elaborate send-off for the Ris Norsing ghosts. Dust falls from the gas chandeliers and coats everyone in the room.

Opa is talking, but I can’t make out the words through all the commotion in the room. I lower the railings on the gurney and lean my ear close to his mouth.

“Please say you have my carpet bag, Faust?”

Opa doesn't notice my astonished expression. I scan the cabin for the soldier with the bruised chin, but he's not down here.

Grandfather rattles off more instructions.

I don't want to appear that I'm not listening to him. Out of the corner of my eye, I scan every face in the room in a panic. Where the hell could that idiot have gone too?

“I want you to find the photograph for Wei province. It's in the carpet bag. You need to give the photo to whoever is piloting the airship.”

Opa's eyes close for an instant. Some medic knocks me out of the way to put smelling salts under his nose. More field medics are trying to squeeze beside Opa's bedside.

I'm taking up space, so I step away in an attempt to find the missing carpet bag. I wish I would've held onto it myself. It's too late for that now. That guy with the banged-up face must have it. Since he's not down here, he has to be on deck with the other men.

I wade through crates of pre-packed medical supplies, trying to make my way up the stairs. The ship shivers and rocks, and I realize we must have taken off. The IV bag on Opa looks like it's about to fall over.

The medics all scramble to grab whatever instruments they have.

Willis has set up a makeshift blood station right before the door. He's applying a tourniquet to his arm and getting ready to be stuck with an eight-inch needle. If I walk past him quickly, he won't notice me, but the bear-like soldier kicks out his leg barring the staircase.

“Where do you think you're going Faust?”

“Opa's asking for his carpet bag. I need to find it.”

For a second, I think Willis might say no. The medic hits him with that needle. Willis jerks as the medic wiggles the needle in his arm, trying to find a suitable vein. I rush up the stairs to the deck, searching the faces of every soldier I pass. I can't believe how many

uniformed men are on board. Soldiers ratchet down maxim guns to the deck. Others are draping light chains over the dirigibles balloon. I assume these are all measures for protecting my grandfather.

“Whoever picked up my carpet bag, I need it now,” I yell to the men and women. The soldiers all focus on me.

“Since Aldrich has been whacked, are we taking orders from him now?” A blond-haired woman asks.

She’s the first woman I’ve seen. I’m surprised that she’s dressed the same as the men are.

A red-haired fellow with a thick brogue accent answers.

“He’s a necromancer and an aristocrat. Maybe Maher set it up for his kin to act in his stead. He needs to be wearing a jump cable. No one should be on a moving airship deck without being harnessed down.”



“Hey, jackasses. Quit gabbing and find me the damn bag.”

I see that everyone on board has the harness on except me.

Annoyed, I grab one of the deck harnesses. I start fastening the belts

along my legs and waist. Every soldier scuttles about the deck searching for the bag as if I were a high-ranking officer. A strong bungee cord harnesses them so they can't fall over the rails of the speeding dirigible. I snort in amusement, but one person doesn't move.

I can see the skinny soldier with his chin and banged-up face. He looks straight at me with fear burning in his eyes. He quickly snaps the riggings off his harness.

"You there? What did you do with Opa's bag?"

The soldier drops the bungee cable to the deck and takes off to a hatch that leads below. There is no escape for him down below. I bolt after him ripping open the trap door and tearing down the ladder. I unclip my harness when it jerks me back. I half tumble and run down the remaining stairs. The guy is no more than five feet in front of me when I see him struggling to tear a shide from his uniform. The deck harness is making it difficult for him.

The shide is written in some foreign language.

Instantly I realize he can't be one of Opa's soldiers.

"Give me those," I yell out. I claw at the man's clothes for the joss paper spells.

As I rip the guy's jacket open, a photograph falls to the floor. Oh no, he's not going to use that.

I quickly cover the photograph with the sole of my Oxford. As the man reaches down to retrieve the photo, I knee the guy in the stomach.

The blow knocks the wind out of him.

It's all the time I need. I snatch up one of the papers. I can feel words burning in my mind. It's a teleportation offering.

I cast the paper in my necromancy, and it burns away.

In an instant, I'm able to use my necromancy to teleport behind him. I kick him quickly in the back, sending him down to the floor. I use the teleportation necromancy again and appear at the soldier's side. I flip him over to his stomach and wrench his arm around until it starts to break.

“Tell me what you did with the carpet bag.”

The soldier says something to me in a language I don't understand. He spits in my face. I club him with my fist and wipe off my cheek.

The yelling must have alerted some of the deckhands. I can hear them running down the metal ladder rungs.

I punch the guy again. Necromancy erupts in my fist. I have a handful of flames that I punch the guy in the face with, and his nose starts to burn and bleed simultaneously.

“Where is the damn carpetbag?”

The man doesn't answer me. I give him a few more fists to the face, and my knuckles rip open. The man begins begging me to stop.

“It's in the biplane. They said they'd kill my family if I didn't help them.”

“Who said they'd kill your family?” a young soldier girl asks.

I'm overly confident that I have him pinned. I only take my eyes off him for a moment to look at Opa's men. It's something I shouldn't have done.

The guy screams, “Home.”

I'm confused by his answer.

It's too late for me to figure out what he's doing. The beaten soldier disappears before my eyes.

Somehow he used his necromancy to teleport away from the zeppelin. I'm left kneeling on an empty floor grasping at air.

CHAPTER 10

DOG FIGHT

The soldier girl jumps over me, running down the hall with three more men.

“There are escape planes on the bottom side of the airship,” she yells over her shoulder.

It takes me a moment to get my feet back under me, but I can hear loud gunfire going off before I do. It’s all I need to get my adrenaline pumping in my veins and to get my feet moving. I run with a few soldiers down the dirigible’s mahogany halls. Most of Opa’s army has their guns out. Others are gesturing magic spells in the air as we run.

The necromancers in the group burst through the door first. They slam past whatever was barring the entry, casting their prepared shield spells with accuracy I’ve never witnessed before. Bullets bounce off the magical wall they have erected. Their necromancy armors me.

I fall behind one of the taller necromancers and take a deep breath. I’m still channeling my teleportation spell. I’m not about to let it go just yet. I scan the room, trying to find something to use to give us an advantage.

Bi-wing planes hang from the bottom of the zeppelin upside down. They are rigged up with some sort of metal claw system. Some still have the diesel lines attached to them from the ship.

A crossfire of bullets and necromancy is thrown around the steel hanger. The rear bay door of the dirigible is wide open, exposing the Nether After’s twilight sky.

The deafening sound of the propellers echoes off all the walls

making it impossible to hear anything being said.

One of Opa's attackers tries to take the carpet bag and climb into a bi-plane. I'm not about to let that happen. I teleport myself from behind Opa's men into the plane seat as the guy is about to sit down. His butt falls into my lap, and I grab the bag, ripping the handle from his hand.

"I'll be taking this."

I quickly scramble over the side of the plane down to the floor. As the man starts to come after me. I grab onto the release lever bolted to the plane and pull it hard. The floor drops out from under the plane, releasing the wheels of the plane and sending it falling upside down into the sky.

"Hope you know how to fly. It's a long way down." I yell to the man.

I don't have time to celebrate. Bullets are still ricocheting by my ears.

As I teleport again, I see a few stray bullets pass through my corporeal form. It's a good thing my necromancy has already taken me safely away from harm.

This time I teleport behind one of the evil necromancers. I hit him with the carpet bag knocking him off his feet. In the process, the handle on the carpet bag breaks loose, spilling photos onto the floor.

I can't be concerned about the bag now. Luckily some other necromancer has noticed the papers flying out of the bag. The fallen photos are magically pulled away from the bag wallpapering the walls of the dirigible. The spell looks so strange the other necromancer stops, confused.



I kick the man so hard it sends him sliding along the hangar. He barely misses falling into the zeppelin's massive clockwork engine. I grab his arm to keep him from falling to his death, but he slashes my arm with a knife, causing me to let go.

I turn my head away as he falls into the engine. I don't want to watch what happens next. I can barely hear his blood-curdling scream through the roar of ship propellers. A sick wet crunching noise fills the cabin as the gears break through his bones. After that, Opa's men are able to take down the rest. They tie up all the bad guys and scramble around the floor and walls picking up the enchanted photos and putting them back into the carpet bag.

Cautiously the soldiers bring me the carpetbag.

The rest of them stare at me, unsure what I might do.

I'd like to know if all new armies behave this way. Maybe they quit thinking for themselves until someone yells at them or gives them an order. They eye me expectantly, and I realize they are waiting for more orders.

"Permission to speak freely sir?"

It's the blond girl who looks like my older sister again.

"Yeah, I'm not a sir. Go ahead and say what's on your mind."

"That was amazing." The girl gushes.

A few of the other men join in praising me. A couple of the guys slap me on the back the girl ruffles my hair. I recognize one of the men from the top deck.

The guy with the brogue accent from before asks the one question everyone else has forgotten.

"What's going on with the brass?"

That's right, all of them have been left in the dark. They don't know what's going on downstairs. It's easy for me to sympathize with them. They must be as antsy as I am, not knowing anything.

"Opa's hurt badly. I need to be getting back down. You'll be taking your orders from Willis until Op... I mean, my grandfather recovers. Please give him the same respect you would give my grandfather."

The men don't seem to object to what I've said. They appear a little calmer. They give me a tight salute and return to questioning all the people who tried to hurt Opa.

I turn my attention to the carpet bag and begin rooting through my grandfather's things. There's a thick layer of dust on the bag's upholstery. The carpetbag contains faded, colored photographs with dates and places written on them. In an instant, I realize I'm holding Opa's etheric transfer archive. Most of these pictures are over a hundred years old. In the pictures are big cities which no longer exist in the world. Paris and Berlin fell in the fourth world war. There's also a photo of some place called New York I've never even heard of.

Only one photo out of them all looks remotely Asian. Someplace I heard about from my mother a long time ago. It's a crumbled metropolis of glass buildings and cracked pavement. The name on the bottom of the photograph reads Hong Kong.

A feeling of relief washes over me as I stare at the image. I know where these ruins are located. This is close to Wei Providence. It

has to be what Opa sent me to find.

I pluck the photo up and secure the bag over my shoulder, realizing I should never have left this carpetbag in the open.

Any necromancer would kill to have this photo archive in their possession. It would allow them to escape nearly anywhere in the world and make it impossible for the Leiche Guard to track them. The perfect weapon for the people who tried to assassinate my grandfather. I realize this might be what the people who hurt me were looking for. Maybe they believed all of the old necromancer families had a cache of photos they carried around with them.

If my father has an archive like this, I've no clue where it would be stashed.

Paranoia grips me as I watch the flurry of activity on deck.

"Willis is right. Any of these men could be assassins."

I don't have time to figure out what to do with the carpetbag.

Instead, I head down below the deck to check in on Opa. I hope his condition has improved and the medic has found a way to stop the bleeding.

My hopes are dashed when I take a whiff of the air. The whole cabin stinks of copper. Jars full of blood cross the room to my grandfather's bedside. Someone has set up an IV. A second bag filled with blood is hanging from a rod on his footboard.

"Is he doing any better?" I whisper to Willis.

Willis rubs at his bandaged arm, looking me over dubiously.

"The necromancy curse wasn't cast to subdue him. Whoever wove this curse wanted him dead. I'm sorry son, the medics have no clue what to do. The bleeding won't stop, no matter what medicine we give him. He's bruising everywhere. The blood starts pouring out again as soon as we give him a fresh transfusion. Did you find the bag he was talking about?"

I hold the bag up to Willis. For some reason, I keep thinking about my mother and how I could do nothing when they spirited her away.

Now I may lose more of my family.

Would Opa want to be buried in the tomb he had made for Mother? It's not his last name, but wouldn't he want to be close to our family?

No, I can't think this way. I won't be a spectator to his death.

I can't count on these medics to treat him. They can't know everything. They don't deal in death magic the way I do. They're combat necromancers. Their necromancy is used for breaking bones and setting fires. They wouldn't be Opa's subordinates if they could command necromancy and my grandfather.

With my resolve set, I look to Willis.

"Willis I need some necromancy supplies. Some paper and a brush or a calligraphy pen."

Willis doesn't comprehend me at first. He searches the cabin as another soldier takes his place in the blood donor chair. They stab the man with a long needle, and his life force drains from his veins and is poured into a jar.

Again I have to turn my head to keep from feeling woozy.

There is a water basin with a rag in it, and I snatch it up and head over to Opa. Wet cloth in hand, I dab at Opa's neck and face. He's burning up. I assume it's part of the necromancy curse.

"It's ok, Opa. It's time to make you better."

Grandfather's eyes roll in his eye sockets trying to find me. He's having difficulty seeing.

"Did you find the archive?"

"Got it right here. It's sitting in the chair next to your bed."

I nudge the chair with my foot scooting it a little closer to him. Knowing where the bag is will ease his mind.

"Faust you mustn't let my archive out of your site. Keep it with you. Most of those images were taken before the territories were divided up. The others on the Eternal Court don't realize I have them."

"Don't worry yourself with it Opa. I'll keep them with me until you are better. Do you need me to fetch you anything?"

"Aspirin," Opa wheezes out, his eyebrows lifting to grin. It's too

much work for the rest of his face. He moans sharply. Blood keeps flowing out of his chest like hot lava. They need to stop the bleeding, but these medics have no clue how to do it. A tall, thin guy suggests they sit him up. A few others think they should work on finding out what type of curse was used.

It all seems too surreal.

Willis drops a pile of old newspapers and an ink pen onto my lap. It's not my calligraphy brush, but it should do.

"It's all I could find. Don't know what good this rot will do."

I grab a sheet of newsprint. I feel it slip in between my fingers.

I need to inscribe a shide. There has to be a word that can stop the bleeding, and I rack my brain for an answer. There's no character in Xenease for 'please stop gushing blood everywhere.'

I fold the paper into a lightning bolt. As I do, an idea forms in my head.

The Leiche Guard is looking for a countercurse. What Opa needs is another curse to cancel out the spell affecting him. Opa requires a death spell that can short out the death spell working on him.

I look through the newspaper and go straight to the obituaries. I need another way a person can die other than bleeding to death. I scan the names for the causes of death. The only thing I find is the usual stuff about the family left behind and the person's accomplishments in life.

Useless information.

Its obituary where all the gory details?

Annoyed, I turned to Willis.

"Willis, quick, tell me how you want to die."

Willis gives me a strange look. "Is that some sort of veiled threat?"

"No, I need to inscribe a death curse that can be prevented."

Willis's eyebrow raises, annoyed. "What's this about Faust?"

"Damn it, you're a Leiche Guard. You are supposed to be a master of death. Tell me the way you want to die already."

"I guess I'd want to go peacefully in my sleep."

“Won’t work. If I cast that curse, Opa would die if he passed out. Come up with a stupid necromancy curse only an amateur would use.”

“A death that can be prevented? What kind of game are you gabbing out?”

“Just answer me.”

“Ok, choking on a chicken bone. It would be an amateur curse to kill someone with. Now shut up, sit down, and stay out of the way.”

“Willis you’re a genius,” I scream excitedly.

I write the characters for choke on the paper and search the cabin for food. I find no food. There are not any chicken bones lying around here. Not even a piece of candy Opa can swallow.

There is a jar of aspirin sitting near the bed. Taking a pill from the bottle, I roll it between my fingers, trying to decide if it will work. The aspirin is small, and it will come out easily. Now the only thing I need to do is lodge the pill in my grandfather’s throat.

Two medics are in a heated debate over what to do next. I try to grab their attention. The medics ignore me, so I raise my voice louder.

“Guys, I have an idea.”

Not one person acknowledges me. Frustrated, I turn to Willis. “Do the Heimlich maneuver when it’s time.”

Willis snorts at me in contempt.

“The Heimlich maneuver? Your Opa’s bleeding to death, and you want me to give him the Heimlich maneuver. Faust, these are highly trained necromancers. If these trained medics can’t come up with a counter-curse. I don’t see how you’re gonna weave one.”

I don’t have time to explain to Willis what I’m thinking. I place the aspirin in Opa’s mouth and offer him some water.

“I need you to take this. I’ve got an idea how we can cancel out the curse.”

“Rather it be scotch,” Opa deadpans as he drops the pill into his mouth.

I wait for him to take a swig of water. I grip the shide in my fist and push necromancy into the calligraphy on the lightning streamer.

Instantly, everything seems to slow down.

The lightning shape paper in my hand ignites in flames. I lay my free hand on Opa's chest, and I can feel the necromancy at work on him.

Red bubbles over my eyes. I'm submersed in warm liquid. I can barely breathe. Pain licks through my chest. It submerges me in oozing arithmetic beats. My ears thunder with each heartbeat.

I'm drowning in someone else's necromancy.

The smell of copper fills my nose. The necromancy squirms like a worm on the back of my tongue. It tastes foul, like the thousand-year-old eggs my dad eats. I swim through the wave of blood until I find the necromancy source. From nowhere, the character for blood appears on a blank sheet of paper. It's written in smudged Sanskrit. The odd thing is I don't read Sanskrit, but I can still read what it says. My fist grabs hold of the spell, pulling on it like a line of ink.

The memories of choking on the swill of the Styx is fresh in my mind. I use it to feed my power. Striking out a line and then another until all that's left on the page is calligraphy for choke.

In the distance, Opa takes a sharp breath. His body appears in front of me, and his eyes bulge. He grabs at his neck. There is yelling in the cabin. All the soldiers have been turned into shadows. Everything sounds muffled, but I can see the shadows race around him even if I can't make out what they are doing. Suddenly the droplets of red blood freeze in midair. Opa's wound stops spewing blood.

His skin throbs and begins reabsorbing the lost blood.

This is not where the necromancy ends.

My grandfather turns blue. He's still coughing as he claws at his throat. In the distance, machines buzz, and everyone turns, realizing I've cast a spell.

"Faust, what did you do?"

I don't recognize my voice when I answer Willis.

"You need to help Opa. He can't breathe. He's choking on the pill I gave him."

Someone's shadow falls over me. At the same time, Opa rips at his IV. They think I'm hurting him. They probably believe I'm part of the coup.

Willis hauls Opa off the gurney with a quick thrust. Grandfather spits out the pill, and it goes flying across the room, hitting the frame of a well-done oil painting.

I try to explain what I've done, but I'm interrupted by the stock of a rifle slamming into the back of my skull.

I go down to the floor face first. Black spots are forming in my eyes, and I'm unable to catch myself before I slam into the cabin's bloody floorboards.

CHAPTER II

DEAD IN THE SKY

My skull is throbbing. I lock my fingers over the knot on my head. A puddle of blood has spread over the teak and holly floor. Something disgusting is between my cheek and the wooden deck, and I realize the sticky stuff at the corner of my eyes is Opa's spent blood.

From this vantage point, I can only see this brown spot where Opa's blood has leaked through his bedding. I hold my breath, trying not to inhale the copper stench tainted with a light whiff of sulfur. This is my grandfather's life essence, polluted by the remains of the foreign necromancy that tried to kill him.

Did my curse work? Is Opa dead or alive?

I don't hear him breathing over the soldiers stomping throughout the cabin. What if I accidentally finished him off?

I've got one hell of a headache, and nothing is making sense.

Suddenly, the rifle barrel of the soldiers who cold-cocked me digs into the small of my back. He hisses out something in French and broken English I can barely understand.

"Stay where you are necromancer. You move again. I'll shoot."

There's no way to tell what's happening. A swarm of boots trip over me, trying to get to the gurney. The medics are yelling out things I don't understand. It appears no one can decide what to do. The only voice I can make out is Willis's.

"Did Eldy weave your braids too tight? What the hell were you thinkin'?"

Overall I am stunned that no one has noticed Opa isn't bleeding out anymore. Did I screw up? No, I didn't. The blood curse tore

away moments before I was hit. I crane my neck to see, but the gun pushes down harder on my spine, warning me not to move.

I would think a trained Leiche Guard should be capable of figuring out what necromancy I cast.

All the soldiers and medics believed I was trying to murder my grandfather.

He shifts the gun to another point on my spine. I can tell this bastard is preparing to pull the trigger. He's trying to figure out where to shoot that will kill me.

He doesn't know that I'm still wearing my pandora vial.

I probably won't die even if he pulls the trigger. As long as the guy doesn't have it pressed against my skull or heart, I'll live.

Willis races across the room and grabs the gun by the barrel. For an instant, I'm thankful he's Opa's second in command.

"Shooting him won't do a hell of a lot of good if he can heal from it instantly. Grab his pandora vial numbskull."

Crap. I thought Willis was coming to help me. I curse a few times under my breath. If I had a shide on me, I'd hex the whole cabin. Maybe smack Willis with a double whammy for pissing me off.

I hope this little show of nonresistance is enough to make them think.

Even this doesn't seem to grab their attention. Willis reaches down and tugs the leather cord encircling my throat. He's untying my pandora vial. I feel it being pulled from under my chest. Every movement I make brings me closer to being shot by these trigger-happy idiots. All I can do now is explain myself before the soldier with the boot on my neck gets the notion to put a bullet in my skull.

"Are you blind? Can't you see the transfusions weren't working? Opa was bleeding to death. The only way to stop a death curse is to replace it with another. The necromancy I cast stopped Opa's bleeding."

Willis isn't convinced. He scoops my pandora vial into his pocket

and squats down beside me.

“You damn near killed your grandfather, kid. You expect us to believe it was unintentional?”

“If I was planning on killing Opa, do you think I would’ve told you exactly what curse I was going to cast? Talk about a wingnut?”

Before Willis can reply, the airship lurches to the left. The pool of blood beneath Opa’s gurney splashes my face. I feel the cold, thick liquid drip down my chin. I think I might hurl, but then Opa clears his throat. He’s recovering.

Willis jumps up and goes to his side. The old man is coughing, and there’s a thumping noise as he bangs his fist against his chest.

“Enough.” Aldrich wheezes out.

The rushing in the room stops. Someone is pouring water into a glass. I can’t see where Willis is anymore. Opa’s varicose-veined feet lean over the gurney. The room is silent as Opa takes a few sips of water. He must be trying to gather his wits about him. I’m surprised at what I hear next.

“Some elite soldiers you are. My fifteen-year-old grandson figured out how to undo my curse while the rest of you had your thumbs up your asses. Can’t you imbeciles see Faust saved me?”

Noisy explanations come from the guards in the room.

Opa will hear none of it. His bare feet slap onto the bloody floor, and he takes a few unsteady steps toward me.

“You there. Take that rifle off my grandson before I wrap it around your neck.”

The gunman doesn’t move fast enough for Opa. Like a martial artist, he moves to the gunman, disarming the soldier and throwing him to the floor. I’m the only one who sees Opa stagger a few steps after he throws him. Something isn’t right. It’s too soon for him to be up and this powerful. Even with the pandora vial, he’s not fully recovered, but he’s putting on a good show. My grandfather lets out a harsh wheeze and clutches the remains of his shirt.

“You touch my grandson again. I’ll have your nut sack for a coin purse.”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry sir.”

The soldier gives me a terrified look as he fumbles out an apology. “Necromancer Thaед, this will never happen again. You have my solemn oath.”

Damn right, it won’t.

Soon as I have a spare second, I’m drawing up a million shades to curse anyone who screws with me again. Adults are all a bunch of closed-minded idiots. Whoever decided our parents and elders should make all the decisions for us deserves a good knock upside the head with a bolt of necrotic magic.

My grandfather’s glare is enough to send the soldier crab-walking away from me. Opa reaches down for me, grabbing hold of my hand. His grip is weak. I don’t pull on his arm to help myself up.

“You ok son. They didn’t hurt you too much, did they?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

I rip my pandora vial from Willis’s hand and drape the cord over my neck.

Besides Opa’s ghastly clothing, my Grandfather has regained most of his color. There’s no visible wound on his chest. It probably disappeared when I replaced the curse with my own.

A lot of his silvery hair has turned pink. Grandfather runs a blood-soaked hand over his beard stubble.

“Don’t worry about your Opa, Faust. I’m a mean old codger. It will take more than some half-rate necromancy spell to do me in.”

Willis is flabbergasted. He tries to help Opa into his bed. My grandfather slaps his hand away.

“Take your hands off me. I expected you to make these fools behave responsibly in dangerous situations. They should not beat up minors and open fire on innocents. I won’t tolerate it, do you hear me?”

Everyone in the cabin nods, but Grandfather isn’t done with them.

“Willis. As of late, I find your performance severely lacking in judgment. You will make sure my grandson is your foremost

concern. I will not lose another member of my family. Apologize to Faust this instant.”

A flicker of hatred fills Willis’ eyes. His dark lips move, but nothing comes out at first. He inhales sharply, and his jaw tightens at the words. “I’m sorry Faust.”

Maybe there is more there, but I can’t read his expression. He turns to my grandfather, his face blank of emotion. “I promise you, Aldrich, nothing like this will ever happen again.”

Opa is being particularly ornery and screams at everyone he sees.

“I’m too angry to even look at the lot of you. Get out of my sight.”

Willis is the first to salute. Everyone else in the cabin does the same.

Their boots clack together at attention. They raise their hands to their brows and march out of the cabin like toy soldiers.

I’m unsure what Grandfather expects of me now that we’re alone. Maybe I should’ve gone on deck with the rest of the soldiers. Maybe Opa needs help getting back in bed so he can sleep.

I instantly realize that’s a stupid idea. He can’t lay back down on that blood-soaked gurney.

The room looks like the scene of a murder. I swear I’ll never be able to look at blood the same way again. The cabin is burned into my memory. When I close my eyes, I can’t imagine what it looked like before they dragged Opa downstairs.

Opa’s hand goes to the knot on my head. I wince away from his touch.

“I thought you said they didn’t hurt you?”

“So I lied a little.”

Grandfather is unamused. He works his jaw, trying to think of what to say.



“My carpetbag. Did anyone see what’s inside it?”

“Yes, but they’ve been taken care of,” I answer, dusting myself off.

I realize I have blood smeared all over my new linen suit. I bite my tongue to keep from snarling. It seems both of our clothes are ruined now. I’m not the one who even got hexed.

Opa’s face twists into a painful grimace, and he begins to stagger. The adrenaline and anger keeping him moving has subsided. In a second, I’m at his side to keep him from falling on the floor.

“What’s wrong? Do I need to fetch the medic?”

Opa grabs for the gurney railing, unable to get his balance. Through gritted teeth, he tells me. “Can’t show them any weakness.

Help me find the Staterooms.”

“Of course,” I answer, grabbing the carpet bag and my makeshift necromancy supplies.

Opa groans loudly. “Sweet grave dust, I feel like I’ve been hit by the tank train.”

“Well, you lost a lot of blood. You shouldn’t even be out of bed.”

I drop my shoulder down so Opa can lean on me. He grips the handle of the carpet bag for extra support. It’s kind of an awkward way for him to hold on. If I weren’t such a damn weakling, I’d pick him up and carry him. I don’t think I can lift a full-sized man. Maybe I should think about lifting weights or something. Focus Faust. That’s not important right now. I chase it from my thoughts.

With Opa hanging on my shoulder and the handle, we somehow stumbled deeper into the airship. I try not to glance around too much so Grandpa won’t have difficulty holding on to me, but I’ve never been in the belly of a zeppelin.

My eyes keep wandering over the posh interior.

If I didn’t know we were flying three hundred feet in the air, I would think we were in one of Ris Norsing’s finest hotels. The ship’s floor is teak inlaid with holly, something I didn’t appreciate while I had the barrel of the gun jammed into my back. Wrought iron gas fixtures illuminate the walls, casting soft orange glows on the wood.

I have to unfasten a few velvet ropes so Grandfather and I can make our way through the corridors.

There is an intense feeling, like we are walking through a museum. The crew keeps this place spotless. Everything smells of furniture polish and cleaners. Nothing appears to have ever been used. The common areas we pass still have the original tags hanging from their furnishings. The furniture is all covered in white sheets to shield the upholstery from dust. As I round by the galley, I find the first Staterooms.

The room is large enough for a full dirigible crew. Rows upon rows of bunk beds go from floor to ceiling. There’re enough beds to accommodate twenty or so people.

I start inside, but Opa grips me tighter, refusing to budge.

“Has your father taught you to think so little of yourself that you want to lie down with the rabble?”

That’s a loaded question if I ever heard one. I’ve no clue what to say. I don’t think of myself as anything special. Not better than the rest of Grandfather’s soldiers.

Unlike me, Opa is special. After all, he leads a whole country and is the head chair of the Eternal Court. Maybe he doesn’t stay in dormitories.

Exhaustion creeps across Grandfather’s face as he corrects his tone of voice.

“There are more staterooms for charon of our status at the ship’s rear. I need peace away from the men. Why don’t we choose from them?”

I nod in agreement. Oh, that’s what he meant?

Opa is worn out. He doesn’t want to rest in a dormitory with all the noise. I grab his arm and help him hobble to the end of the vessel. My keen hearing picks up the sound of the engine’s propellers. I briefly wonder what Opa’s men did with the charon they captured. Did they execute them?

Opa pulls away from me, heading to the door with the words ‘presidential suite’ engraved on a brass plaque. He opens the door. A dazzling light blinds me as we enter.

Unlike the rest of the dirigible, the floor here is polished granite.

Exotic marble accents hang on mahogany paneling. This reminds me of my grandfather’s home, right down to the exquisite fabrics hanging from the bed. The stateroom he has chosen could accommodate a whole family of charon. Grandfather makes his way to the four-posted bed and collapses into the mattress. He wallows against a pillow before I help him under the sheets.

“Do you want me to help you get cleaned up?”

“It can wait,” Opa mumbles burying his face in the pillow.

“There’s another suite connected to this one. I want you to stay there. I don’t know if we can trust everyone on the zeppelin. Willis

is proving himself to be trying at the moment.”

The question that’s been burning me finally comes out. “Which one of the men tried to kill you?”

“It was one of the spies who tortured you. He was playing dead. Willis’s crew had already put him into the body bag. Somehow he got hold of his pandora vial, and he struck me with a curse when I went upstairs. The men didn’t know what to do. Willis jumped in. He mowed him down with that awful Tommy gun. I’m glad you didn’t see it. The house was terrible. I think it would’ve given you nightmares.”

I can barely believe what I’m hearing.

I fumble out the words, “Then Willis saved you.”

“I know you don’t believe me, but Willis is not bad, Faust. He takes his job seriously. Probably one of the finest Leiche Guards I’ve ever met. I don’t know why he’s been so flaky lately.”

“Is he a Leiche Guard? I thought he might be part of this new army you are making. I still don’t know why you think the rest of the Eternal Court will allow this. Charons don’t have armies. Humans do.”

Grandfather doesn’t object. I offer him a glass of water. He coughs as he tries to swallow it down.

“Yes, humans do have armies. Sometimes they are used to protect their country’s borders. The Wasatch charon have been sending in spies and trying to undermine the Ris Norsing government. If they won’t respect our boundaries and stay out of our country, I have to find a way to close off our territory to outsiders. These private forces can help me do that.”

Grandfather rubs his eyes again. “You mind if I lay down for a while? We can talk more when we get to Xeno.”

“But we’re not headed for Xeno. No one knew what to do when you collapsed, so Willis told the men to fly us out of the city. I imagine we’re somewhere in Ris Norsing.”

Opa yawns again. “We need to go to Xeno, where Dr. Wu is hiding. I can’t keep my eyes open any longer.”

“Then sleep. Don’t worry about the ship, the men, or anything. Rest. We can figure things out in the morning.”

Grandfather falls asleep before I make it to my room. Is this where Carol gets it from? He’s snoring like a freight train. I’m too physically and emotionally exhausted to care.

Opa is pretending to be fine. It bothers me that Grandfather must always be in control. I can’t imagine how hard it must be not to show any weakness. I wring my hands on the carpet bag handle before letting it drop onto the roll-top desk.

I won’t screw up again.

I can start by not leaving this bag out in the open. I carefully empty the bag of its photographs and stack them into piles organized by countries, dates, and a third collection for the ones I can’t identify. One picture stands out. Some place called LA from a country I’ve never heard of. I put it in a pile all by itself. Looking over the stacks of snapshots, I realize it’s unsafe to be toting them in a simple carpet bag.

I need something to hide them in that can’t be stolen. Opa’s ring is still on my thumb. I roll it between my fingers a few times, wondering if I can squeeze the archive in there. I’m not that good at transmutation necromancy.

A few failed shides, and an hour later, I can stuff every photograph inside the ring’s secret compartment. Only another necromancer will be able to access it now.

As I push the ring back on my thumb, I can’t help but feel nervous. It would be so easy to steal it in my sleep. I search around the room for a safe hiding place for the ring. Some countless vases and lampshades would make a swell hiding spot, but it seems too obvious. Staring down at my necromancy supplies, my gaze falls across my inkwell. It’s not as obvious as my sock drawer, and the ink is dark enough to obscure whatever I drop in.

I plunge the ring into the Indian ink and watch it sink to the bottom of the bottle. The photos are vaulted inside the ring with my necromancy.

Only me or grandfather will be able to open it. Satisfied, I head for the water closet for a long hot soak. Hopefully, the water will drain away some of my nervous energy.

Unfortunately, it doesn't. The beating water does nothing for my throbbing head or humming pandora vial. I'm too grossed out to watch all the blood coming off my skin circling the drain. At least I can remove the rest of the bandages I'm wearing. Having them gone makes me feel cleaner. I make my way back into the bedroom beside Opa's and plop down on the bed.

CHAPTER 12

UNSETTLING TRUCE

Even after wallowing in a soft down comforter, I can't sleep. I keep thinking about the little girl who tried to kill me. How worried Opa is about the ship. How am I supposed to lead an army into my father's territory? I have this nagging feeling that I shouldn't be doing this.

Then there's Mom. Mom's lovely face and smile and memories of us playing games together. I remember I'm doing all this for her. I'm going to find my mother. It doesn't matter how many laws I'm breaking.

It's obvious to me I will get no rest tonight. I jump out of bed and put on a pair of house slippers and a robe.

The ship reminds me too much of some fancy hotel room. Even as I take a seat at the desk, I feel stiff. Like I'm using someone else's things.

I pull out my calligraphy supplies and hear the ring clinking inside the inkwell. I begin folding and inscribing shides. Each time I dip my pen I smile, knowing what's inside. I fold piles and piles of spells. Enough so I can form a garland out of them and hang them in every inch of my room to dry.

I'm still feeling restless.



The only thing left on the desk is the snapshot Opa wanted me to give to the zeppelin's pilot. I read the coordinates, running my fingers over a place labeled Hong Kong.

I decide it's as good a reason as any to get up.

In the closet are a few extra military uniforms hanging among some fancy suits, none of which are my size. With two quick tears and a few rolled-up sleeves and pant legs, I look like a sloppier version of Willis now.

After a good look in the mirror, I realize this is as good as it will get. With any luck, the crew will stop seeing my slanted eyes and thinking I'm a foreigner out to get them. Somehow I doubt it.

I snatch up the photo and the inkwell and start making my way to the airship's bridge.

All the gas fixtures on the walls have been snuffed out. The zeppelin has become quite dark. I can barely hear the hum of the propellers. Many men sleep two per bed in the cramped dormitory I saw earlier. Is Willis in there with them, sulking over my grandfather yelling at him? I make my way to the bridge unseen. I find a few soldiers loitering about, unsure what to do.

“Are any of you necromancers?” I ask, startling the man at the airship’s steering column.

The pilot controlling the zeppelin looks more like a raisin than a man.

I can’t keep my eyes off the super thick mustache above his lip. It bobs up and down like a mop as he chews on a banana.

“Rumor has it you saved the brass while everyone else stood around with their thumbs up their butts. What do you need me for?”

The two soldiers in the cabin snicker at his remarks. A blush creeps across my face making me feel hot all over. I’m on a mission, so I hold up Opa’s photograph to him and wait for him to take it.

“Maher needs us to bring the airship to the ruins of old Hong Kong. If we fly into my country, my father will be onto us. Can an etheric transfer be used to move the whole ship?”

The man scratches his head. “I guess it can be done if we have a reference image and find an anchoring point in the photograph. You’re talking about moving a whole zeppelin. That’s no easy feat.”

“It can be done though?”

“I suppose. One of our biggest issues would be transferring the guards who aren’t necromancers. Not everyone in Aldrich’s army is a necromancer. Most of the boys carrying guns can’t cast a lick of necromancy.”

This is new information to me. I had assumed everyone on board was an ex-Leiche Guard. It explains why so many guards use guns instead of spells. The other two crew members on the bridge glance at each other worriedly. They too, have pistols on their belts.

“I can barely cast a summoning circle. I’m a mechanic, and

Eternal Court says I've no need for magic."

The other mumbles are almost inaudible.

"I'm a weapons specialist."

"Our journey ends here then," I hiss out in annoyance.

I try to find something to kick, but nothing is around the bridge. All I want to do is take some of the burdens off of Opa. I'm about as useless as the rest of these stooges.

"I think it might calm Opa down if you at least navigate us in the direction of Xeno."

The man with the handlebar mustache nods at me. He heads over to the dirigible's control panel, tossing his banana peel on the floor. I watch him move a few cogs up and down. After several cranks on the controls, a hiss of steam blows into the cabin.

Out of the bridge window, I can see and feel the zeppelin coming about. The water of the river Styx appears on the opposite side of the airship.

The captain gives me a pat on the shoulder.

"I know you don't realize this, but we won't get there for days if we have to fly to Xeno. It's not a short trip. There's more to it than sneaking across the border. There's the issue of refueling."

"I'll take full responsibility if I made the wrong decision, but I want to make things easier on Opa. After what's happened, he needs rest and not have so many worries."

"Mighty admirable, you should go hit the hay boy. This tub isn't going to move any quicker than eighty-four kilometers per hour, even with magic spells."

I twist my hands through my long braids in frustration. I'm useless.

I can't even do the simplest things. As I make my way back below deck, the rotation of the guards begins. Soldiers half asleep hop off the bunks and tie up their trousers.

The one person I don't want to see is standing in front of me. Willis is among a few guards trying to get his eyes open. His face is puffy, and his eyelashes are still crusted with sleep. It seems like

someone has let all the steam out of him.

“The old man, how’s he doing?”

“Opa’s exhausted. I don’t want him disturbed for any reason.”

Willis’s jaw clamps tight. I see a mix of expressions pass over his face. I’m about to leave again when he grabs me by the shoulder.

“Umm, Faust... I’m sorry I overreacted. I heard what happened in the hangar bay from a few men. It was unprofessional of me to jump to conclusions.”

“Unprofessional? You thought I was part of a coup. You had one of your men dig a gun in my spine.”

“No, that’s not right... what I mean to say is I’m sorry, I had no clue what you were doing, and it freaked me out. I care about your gramps Faust. The man’s been nothing but kind to me. Most necromancer families look at everyone else in the charon empire as pawns for their amusement. Your Opa doesn’t do that to us. We’re not just tools to him.”

Willis looks down at his bare feet and begins putting a holey pair of socks on. I become more irritated, and I don’t know why.

Oh yeah, because Willis is a freaking tool, but not the kind he was talking about. I keep my thoughts to myself. I realize Willis is trying to make amends. It sounds sincere, but I don’t want to accept his apology. He told me to trust him, and then he turned on me at the first sign of trouble. I yank on my mini-braids in frustration.

I realize we don’t have time for me to be petty right now. Instead, I tried to explain to Willis why I was on the bridge.

“None of this matters right now. It would be best if you thought about a way to etheric transfer this zeppelin to Hong Kong. Opa can’t use his necromancy. I don’t have the necromancy reserves to pull off the spell myself. So the burden is going to fall on you and the rest of the crew.” “We’ll need to get creative so Aldrich has time to recuperate. I can only keep the men off him for so long. As for the zeppelin, I’ve got no clue how to move it to Xeno. Worse comes to worst. We can ditch the non-necromancy users and go on without them.”

“That would leave Opa pretty vulnerable, wouldn’t it?”

I scuff my feet along the teak floors, trying to rub out a black mark left by someone’s boots. The more I think about it, the more frustrated I become with this situation.

Opa wants me to sneak his whole army into Xeno territory, into my father’s land. This is going to seriously piss off my old man. Father hates Opa. I can easily imagine my father summoning the Leiche Guard to arrest everyone. He might even turn his mutant horde loose to pick over the remains of the army. If we find a way to sneak past my father and make it to Hong Kong, that doesn’t ensure we will even find Doctor Wu.

There are too many possibilities, and I’m feeling overwhelmed.

There is also the matter of my sister Carol. She is still home alone. I doubt Geraldine or my father has even noticed I’m gone, or they would have already come looking for me.

I wonder if Carol has eaten dinner tonight. She probably thinks I’ve run away and abandoned her in crazy town. My fists ball up in frustration. Willis made the mistake of nudging my arm, trying to get me to come back to reality.

I almost haul off and deck him.

Of course, splitting the party is a bad idea. I already know it’s a mistake that could cost Opa his life, but I don’t have any answers to offer Willis. He doesn’t take the uncomfortable silence between us well.

“What’s wrong with you? No witty comebacks? No, I told you so?” “I’m worried about my little sister Carol. I usually look after her, and with the attack on Opa’s life, what’s to say she’s safe? My father won’t notice if something happens to her. Do you think there’s a way we can send word to her about what’s going on?”

Willis stiffens at my confession.

“No, we can’t take that kind of chance. I understand she’s your family, but Opa is your family too. Do you have friends she can stay with while you’re away?”

The only person I can think of is Mrs. Wang.

“There’s a ghost who runs the tea room back home. She knows Carol. I’m sure she could look in on her, but it’s a big favor to ask.”

Willis’s nose curls upward. “You’d trust leaving your sister with a spook? I’m sure Councilman Thaед would be better than a ghost.”

“No, he’s not,” I yell louder than I intend.

Crew members in the bunks roll over and start eavesdropping. I see their shiny eyes start trying to understand why I disturb their sleep. Maybe they think me and Willis are going to get into it again.

I duck my head in shame and offer a few words of apology. I’m so embarrassed I trot back to Opa’s Stateroom.

Willis is hot on my heels. “Hey, kid hold up.”

“If you feel a ghost can take better care of your sister than Mortimer, I can have a message sent to one of the men, but we leave out what’s happening. I don’t want a paper trail that will incriminate us with Mortimer. I still don’t understand why you’re so chummy with the spooks. Didn’t your father ever tell you how dangerous they are?”

I turn on the balls of my feet, preparing to tell Willis off when what he says sinks in.

Opa’s Leiche Guard has offered to help me protect Carol. That’s the one thing I can’t do on my own.

I don’t know why I’m so surprised.

The Leiche Guard’s only purpose is to serve and protect. “We can send a letter with one of the vultures,” I offer. Willis shakes his head no.

“We’ll have one of the men deliver it. I don’t trust the soul birds for something this important.”

A feeling of relief washes over me. I scramble into my quarters, ducking under my shide streamers. I forget to tell Willis to duck. He’s caught off guard when the lightning-shaped origami smacks him in the face. Watching the tall man swat the necromancy offerings away is funny, but I can’t seem to smile.

Before I left, it looked as good a place as any to hang them up. Now I’m slightly embarrassed that my room is in such disarray.

“Ignore the shides. They only hang on the door frame so the ink can dry.”

Willis doesn't act like he hears me. He snaps a few streamers down and examines the calligraphy while I quickly scribble letters to my sister and Mrs. Wang.

“I'll get this letter home for you as soon as possible. You have to tell me, what's with all the joss paper? You've got origami hanging over your entire room.”

I look up and stare at the streamers.

“I won't be unprepared again the next time something goes wrong.”

Willis glances at the origami in his hand.

“It never ceases to amaze me how differently every culture uses necromancy. Middle Eastern necromancers burn joss paper that is similar to this. I guess most of the Orient uses them or white talismans. It seems weird to me to make offerings to ghosts instead of mumbling an incantation or waving your hands in some stupid dance. Can you explain why a boy your age still uses paper to cast spells?”

“Well, for one, it's quicker. The spells inscribed are pre-activated, so they don't draw on your power reserves as much. As for why I've not quit using them, no one has had the time to show me how to cast necromancy without them. I need them to exorcise ghosts and cast spells.”

I'm suddenly very aware that I need to be doing something. I start tearing down the shides and putting them in my pockets.

“I can do the basic stuff. Etheric transformation, probably a soul harvest or two if I concentrate.”

I grab hold of the chair and use it to boost myself to tear down a few more shides.

I embarrassingly admit. “After a few spells, my necromancy starts eating me from the inside out. At times, I can feel it bubbling inside me, wanting to get out, but I've got no clue how to push it through my hands without the offerings. Since you're making such

a big deal, I guess Ris Norsing charon don't use shides when they're learning?"

"Nope, not at all," Willis says, rubbing his hands over his Jheri curls.

"I probably would never have become a necromancer if I had to draw fancy calligraphy on everything. My penmanship has never been that great. I'd probably try to ink a curse and end up with a spoiled pie."

Grandfather lets out a walrus-style snore from the other room. I snicker with Willis. I can see he wants to check on Opa, but I don't want him accidentally waking him up.

This time I'm the one who blocks the doorway.

"Let him sleep for now. He tries to act all invincible, but that curse took him down."

"You know I didn't know what you were doing when you cast your spell on him. I recognized the joss paper but never realized you could cancel out a curse by applying another one. It's not something they teach you in the Leiche Guard academy... It was quick thinking."

There's an awkward moment of silence. I feel I have to say something.

"The important thing is Opa is safe. I'm sure you would've saved him if you'd known how."

Willis shakes his head.

"I don't want to believe it, but all you high necromancer families are a cut above the rest of us. It bothers me that you have more access to spells than the Leiche Guard. So tell me, what else are these shide things good for besides what I've seen so far?"

"The only difference in my necromancy and yours is my magic is more geared toward putting the smack down on unlawful spirits. I can cast fire, lightning, death, plague, and teleport behind an enemy to hex them."

Wait...Teleporting. Something clicks in my head.

I look over a group of shides hanging on the windowsill and

examine the thick calligraphy I've sketched on them. It's a character for movement that can be used in several ways. My breath quickens when I realize this is what we need. It is so straight forward. I don't know why I didn't see the answer before. I grab my movement shides and dangle them over Willis's head. The Leiche Guard gives me a skeptical look. He ducks away, afraid I'm about to bespell him, but I don't care.

“This is it. I know how we can get to Hong Kong.”

CHAPTER 13

CATTLE

I dangle the shide in front of Willis's face showing him the calligraphy for movement. He stares back at me, stunned.

"You know I don't read Kanji, Chinese, Tagalog, or whatever script you Xeno people use, right? So you'll have to explain what you're holding in front of my face."

"We use Xenobian. Actually, it's a mixture of all those syllabary characters. That's not the point. This is a movement shide. When I was little, I used this shide to cast my etheric transfer spells to help me get to my soul harvests. I'm sure we can use this shide to move the men and the ship at once."

"How?" Willis asked, scratching the stubble on his chin.

I can't help but notice he needs to shave. He may have a full beard grown in a matter of days. Unlike me, who only has one whisker to pluck. Guess I'm experiencing a little beard envy. The rings under his eyes have gotten darker since our first encounter. He looks tired still, so I try to dumb it down a little.

"We can transfer the ship the same way you use this shide to transfer anything else. We have each of the soldiers who don't have magic hold onto one of my lightning streamers, and the necromancy will find them. Then we can tap a shide into the dirigible walls every so many feet. It will wrap this ship in a perfect bubble of necromancy. All we need then is someone to cast the spell."

I look at Willis expectantly. He is the captain of the Leiche Guard, the only one who can successfully pull the spell off beside my grandfather. I can see his hopeful expression turn to shock when

he realizes I'm waiting for him to say he'll do it.

"Don't look at me. I need to protect you and your grandfather. I'm not draining all my necromancy to move this boat to Hong Kong. It will cripple our defense strategies."

"You might not have to. There is an old guy with a super thick mustache piloting the dirigible. He seems to think he could transfer the whole ship."

"You mean Max? I guess it's possible he could cast a spell. His family designs airships, and he worked with them before he joined the corps."

"Perfect, he should know intimately how the zeppelin works and how to weave a spell to move one. We should go ask him."

Willis doesn't wait for me to finish my sentence. He is up and off to the bridge before I get done locking grandfather's cabin. When I get to the bridge, Willis is already explaining my idea, and the pilot, Max, agrees. Overall, he looks impressed.

"Interesting, never thought of using the training offerings."

"It will work. I'm sure of it." I say, feeling left out.

The men turn, expecting me to add something more.

"The shides will pull the necromancy straight to the officers. You'll be able to feel the whole volume of the dirigible. Long as you can move something as big as the airship, we should be ok."

One of the guards with a gun seems unconvinced.

"There isn't a necromancer on this rig that can make a shide. Most Ris Norsing necromancers are finger wigglers and tincture users. They pull their magic down with words or gestures."

"It won't make a difference. I can make them. I'm sure you could copy it down in ink if I showed you a character. It will be much quicker to make shides than teaching everyone to use magic."

It's weird when no one disagrees with me. The soldiers accept what I say.

Willis ends the silence with his thoughts. "Either way we go, we must get moving on this plan. I don't want to protect Maher in the sky. We don't know how big this coup extends. Far as I'm

concerned, we're sitting on a floating bomb. All it would take is a few well-placed necromancy spells or bullets, and the whole zeppelin would come crashing down to the earth."

Max snorts in disgust. He doesn't contradict Willis. Instead, he gives a few commands to the soldiers on the bridge.

"You there, get every non-necromancy user drawing up Faust's shides. I want enough to wallpaper the outside of the hull. Make sure we have enough for all the men too."

I hand Opa's photo of Hong Kong to the captain. Max does a double-take and stares at the picture, mesmerized.

"Wow haven't seen anything like this type of city in years. It's difficult to imagine that humans were once capable of building cities like this. Only a decade ago, they were on the brink of extinction."

Max turns the photo over, looking at the date and the coordinates. "Is Hong Kong still standing in Xeno?"

"Not as glossy as it looks in Opa's photo. Most of Hong Kong was destroyed when the nuclear reactors melted down. My father told me never to go soul harvesting there. He said there's too much chance that the buildings will come crumbling down on my head. Since it's radioactive, the humans also steer clear of it."

"Same as London," Max whispers wistfully, "Nuclear power destroyed all the great ones. The cities weren't prepared for the reactors to be without electricity for months. Shows you the only thing motivating the fleshies is greed."

I agree with Max primarily because I don't know any humans. I want to believe there is human civilization somewhere not motivated by money. Of course, I've never heard of it.

Willis is quick to add in. "As luck will have it, the radioactivity will keep the humans from seeing us. We don't have to worry about hiding the dirigible or being seen popping out of thin air unannounced."

"Since radiation doesn't bother our kind, we're pretty much set," Max says.

Willis cups his hand over my ear and whispers.

“This will be a safe place for your Opa to recuperate too. No one will look for us in the abandoned metropolises.”

Max keeps flipping the image over and over again and sighing heavily. He’s doing more than looking for a metaphysical anchor to the human world. I feel compelled to ask him.



“Are you old enough to remember the world this way? I ask because I recently found out my mother was a lot older than I thought she was.”

“I still remember the world being a shiny glass-coated utopia, if that’s what your asking. There were too many humans back then. We didn’t have to work so hard to harvest souls. Humans were everywhere, and necromancy was so abundant everyone could cast it.”

There’s a long pause. I’m suddenly worried Max is mad at me.

“Does it bother you my family has more access to necromancy than yours does?”

“No, actually, I don’t mind at all. You won’t believe me when I tell you this, but I never much cared for spellcraft. It always felt wrong.”

“We’ve been lollygagging too long. You need to make those shides if I’m going to etheric transfer this whole rig. Probably keep

an eye on your Grandpa too.”

I pat Max on the shoulder and head downstairs. I’m not surprised when I get to the suite and find Opa still snoring away.

Grabbing a seat at the roll-top desk, I sit down to work. I draw hundreds and hundreds of movement shides and don’t notice when my pen slips from my hand, and I fall asleep.

The blanket falling over my shoulders wakes me up. I twist around, startled. Opa gives me a fleeting look of surprise. During the night, his skin has taken on a yellow tone. Even the whites of his eyes are yellow. Grandfather looks sickly, but I don’t tell him.

“I didn’t mean to wake you, Faust.”

“Shouldn’t I be saying that to you?” I yawn.

Falling asleep at the desk was an awful idea. I’m sore all over. My neck feels like a mass of knots.

“What’s with all these shides? I went into your room, and they were sprawled all over your bed.”

“We need them to move the dirigible to Hong Kong. No need for you to worry. Willis and I worked it all out.”

“I wasn’t concerned at all,” Opa says, patting me on the head, “So when will I be able to see Hong Kong?”

“Well, once we get the shides attached to the ship’s hull, we’ll be on our way. I guess now we only need to know what to do when we get there.”

“That will be the easy part. We must find Dr. Wu and convince her to come to Ris Norsing with us. I don’t look for it to be anything too difficult for us now. Her foreign necromancy should be easily detectable once we’re in close.”

I’m uneasy about how simple Opa thinks this will be. After all, besides knowing Dr. Wu lives somewhere in Wei Providence, we only know what my mother wrote in her dossier. The information is nearly six years old. Doctor Wu could have moved on by now. She could have easily abandoned her work in the forbidden sciences.

If detecting foreign necromancy was so easy, wouldn’t my father have come here to investigate what was happening? He’d know

about these experiments and would've put a stop to them. We have no knowledge of this so-called doctor's treatment works. Maybe I should bring my grandfather back to earth so he doesn't get his hopes too high.

"How much do we know about Dr. Wu's procedure? Did mom document any cases where she actually cloned someone?"

"I prefer the word *reanimate*, not *cloned*. *Cloned* is so sterile. It makes it sound like your mother will be a copy of what she once was."

Grandfather snorts at me. "Besides, what does a boy your age know about cloning?"

Did he dodge my question? I feel rather stupid. Maybe Opa knows nothing about Dr. Wu, and this trip has been a wild goose chase. Before I go judging him, I need to find out more.

Cloning is a subject my father is extremely interested in. Because of the spider monsters in the basement, we have a library full of books on odd subjects. There is a particularly large selection of cloning and growing monster parts. If Opa only knew about what Dad was experimenting on in the basement, maybe he could help me and Carol.

I spit out some random things I've read in my father's books.

"Well, the humans tried to clone everything from chickens to organs for themselves in the mid-twenty-first century. They experimented with stem cells, test-tube babies, even glow-in-the-dark fish."

In one of Dad's books, I remember a particularly grotesque image of a human eye being grown on the back of a rat. For an instant, I imagine parts of my mother being created the same way. It appalls me, my mom being grown piece by piece, grafted onto animals, and god knows what else.

Instead of mentioning that, I tell my grandfather some of the stupider trivia I know about cloning. At the same time, I pour my grandfather a tall glass of something brown from an alcohol decanter, hoping it will loosen his lips up. Heck, it works for my

dad.

“Primarily, It’s a failed science. Besides a billion-dollar cheeseburger, humans didn’t make much of anything productive from cloning technology.”

Opa takes a big drink from the glass, and his shoulders relax. The alcohol is doing the trick. He casually takes off his soiled clothes and pulls out a new uniform from the wardrobe.

“That’s where you’re wrong dear boy.”

Opa looks at his reflection and notices his silver hair is still pink with blood. Before he dresses, he pours a basin of water over his head and scrubs off some of the dried blood.

“Charon still use cloning today, primarily for medicine and creating hardier livestock for the humans to eat. We do most of the scientific labor ourselves. It’s much too dangerous to entrust this knowledge to the cattle.”

‘Cattle.’ Does every charon in Ris Norsing think of humans as cattle? Something irritates me about people being compared to resources.

I see humans more as future ghosts.

Everyone else doesn’t seem to see things my way. Am I wrong?

Opa has been rattling on, and I haven’t been paying attention. I nod, trying my best to pick up where he left off. He’s downed the glass of alcohol I poured for him and is pouring himself another.

“We charon have used the outbreak of natural disasters to take science away from humans for generations. When the science becomes too advanced, we cull the herd.”

I bust out of my stupor as the words seep in.

“Wait, you’re saying we charon have killed scientists to keep this technology from resurfacing?”

Opa seems all too enthusiastic about this.

“Only the brightest and the best. Why should it matter if their souls are harvested tomorrow or today? All humans die at some point. Does it matter if they are relieved of their life early? The sooner they die, the sooner they can go to heaven or nirvana, or

whatever they call it now.”

My hands are shaking. The soul harvests are being manipulated. Opa came right out and admitted it. If this is true, I may have killed someone whose time wasn’t up yet. How many soul harvests have I done? Hundreds? Thousands? Have I been murdering humans? Am I a murderer?

The voice in my head says, “Yes.”

The little girl from my grandfather’s house drifts into my mind. I see her appear behind Opa. She leans over him smirking.

“We’re all cattle to the Eternal Court. You, me, the humans, everyone are just a means to an end.”

I watch, horrified, as she playfully squeezes Opa’s shoulder.

“I might still be alive if it wasn’t for you. Instead, I’ve been mowed down by Willis’s awful Tommy gun.”

This isn’t happening. She’s not there, I tell myself. I’m just imagining things. I squint my eyes shut.

My legs feel like they’re on fire. I jump up from the desk and pace around the room. The word ‘cattle’ keeps repeating in my brain over and over like it’s gotten stuck there. How many people have I unknowingly killed?

The ice clinks together in Opa’s glass, and he gives me an odd expression.

“Something wrong Faust?”



I turn back to the little girl, relieved to see she's disappeared. I can't keep pretending I don't care anymore.

"Does the Eternal Court choose the scientist who will die? Do you do it? Does my father?"

Opa nods at me, pouring a third glass. He's managed to get off his shirt. A large X-shaped scar has formed from last night's curse.

"A pity. Of course, both mine and your father's hands are tied. We are only two heads of the Eternal Court. The rest of the court agrees humans are dangerous and they must be protected from themselves."

"It's exhausting arguing day in and day out with those idiots. None of them are as old as I am. They don't remember when human societies were teetering on the brink of extinction. They started playing with viruses. Cloning plagues, mixing DNA of different life forms to see what would happen. They would use these things to kill each other before the Eternal Court stepped in. Of course, we charon weren't about to let that happen."

Opa drops a clean-billed hat on and examines himself in the cabin's long mirrored walls. He turns to me, fastening on his cufflinks.

"Humans are dangerous little children, you give them fire, and they burn down their houses. When they have no house left, they burn down their neighbor's house too. You give them science. They try to make bombs to destroy their world. It's a never-ending cycle of death. Death and science go hand in hand. Probably why we charon are so inclined to the sciences."

A quick flash of my father working in his lab passes in my mind. Dad is obsessed with the sciences. It's like it's a second addiction for him. He is always tinkering with something down there. I just can't believe he'd kill another scientist in cold blood. He has too much respect for them.

"Why are we shepherding humans to the afterlife if they are so dangerous? Why not leave them in the stone age, picking at rocks with sticks, and let them deal with a world overwrought with

ghosts?"

Opa gives me a big grin.

"Your mother asked me the same thing when she was about your age. We do it for the necromancy."

A weird cold feeling comes over me.

"How pray tell are you supposed to twist death into spells without the source of your magic? We exist entirely to bring the dead to the river Styx and deliver the humans to the afterlife. Without their unspent death energy, we would have no necromancy to cast. We'd have no ghosts to commune with, no way of predicting the future. Without our magic, we'd be no better than the cattle."

My fist balls up inside my new trouser pockets. People are not something to be used as commodities. Every bone in my body tells me Opa is wrong.

There is no way I can tell Opa this.

He's on the Eternal Court, and his word is the law. Even if I could object when has any adult listened to me? Opa is still going on about something, not noticing the sick expression I have on my face.

"I've thought about this for a long time. Imagine for a moment every charon could have an unlimited supply of necromancy. There would be no need for territories. Everyone would be able to collect as many souls as they desired. All it would require would be for us to reincarnate everyone who dies. If Dr. Wu's technology works, we can do this. It will benefit charon, human, and ghost alike."

Opa pauses to take a drink. It seems very deliberate. Like he's waiting for effect. I wonder how many times he's rehearsed this speech.

"No human would ever get stuck being a ghost. If Dr. Wu's technique works, you and I could save all of humanity. Humans could live out their lives without the fear of death."

My anger gets the better of me. I'm finding it harder to keep my temper in check.

“I don’t see what this has to do with my mother’s empty grave.”

“Calypso will be the first to come back. We will end death for our family first. It’s only fitting, considering how much you and I have sacrificed.”

“How... how do you expect to do this?”

“According to your mother’s notes. A soul can be returned as long as you have the remains of the individual who died. Calipso’s body is safely kept at the bottom of the ship. We will use her as proof of Dr. Wu’s concept. We will have our family back when she is safely alive again.”

“Faust, you must understand that this resurrection technology has a much bigger application besides bringing back your mother.”

“We can use the same technology to resurrect the ghost in the netherworld. Life and Death will be a complete circle. No more souls will ever get lost in that infernal light. Humans will be returned to their reality shortly after they die. It will allow more families to become necromancers. With more necromancy available, the Nether After will prosper and enter a golden age. What can be more natural?”

Don’t you mean what can be more unnatural? I think to myself. Spirits are getting a one-way ticket back to the surface. Ghosts never enter the light. It’s a perversion of all things charon. It flat-out scares me.

Yet I want this borderless world Opa dreams of. This nirvana where no secret governments and police are banging on your door in the middle of the night. Most of all, I want to see my mom again. My thoughts trail off.

If I don’t help, then what happens to my mom?

It sinks in that she’s been here with us in the dirigible this whole time. Well, at least her body has. I want to see her.

“Where is mom’s body? You said she’s on the ship.”

“It’s in the bowels of the airship. You can’t get to it while the vessel is moving.”

The hell I can’t, I think to myself.

I'm already thumbing through my slides, looking for one which will allow me to pass through walls. Or something that will allow me to fly.

I'm forgetting something.

If Dr. Wu has been safe all this time, what's changed? Why would she not be safe now?

Instead of taking off to find my mom's body. I hedge Opa for more information. Only one question comes to mind.

"Father has never made a move on Dr. Wu before, so why does she have to return to Ris Norsing with you? Why can't she continue doing her work in Xeno?"

"When the Eternal Court hears about this, they will want to acquire the technology themselves. Unlimited necromancy will be priceless to all charon. Many of the old necromancers will not want the upset in power. If they feel too threatened, they will probably want to destroy it. They will demand we surrender the research."

Opa grimaces at me. "That will include your mother if we resurrect her."

"I won't let them retake her." I blurt out without thinking.

My hand goes up to cover my mouth. Opa gives me a stern look of agreement.

"I'll be damned if I let those morons keep her from us any longer. If your father tries to side with the Eternal Court to stop us, he will also be dealt with."

"Dad wouldn't side with the Eternal Court. He loved Mom. He'd do anything to bring her back."

"I don't believe that. After what happened with your mother, Mortimer doesn't dare raise his voice against the Eternal Court. If he found out someone was working on this kind of research in his territory, he would have to go along with the Eternal Court's wishes, or else he might be executed. I'm sure he's worried about leaving you and your sisters as orphans."

There's a knock on the door, and someone I don't recognize comes in. "Beggin' ya pardon, sir, but we must tap in a few of these

shides down here.”

Opa says nothing as the crewman hammers my shide papers to the door. Grandfather’s whole body stiffens, giving off the impression he’s in complete control. More like he’s trying to pretend he’s not sick.

“How prepared are you?”

“We’re almost done sir. I reckon we’ll be departin’ soon. You may want to go to the top deck. Is it ok if I take these?” The crewman asks, gathering up my pile of shides.

I choose not to answer him. Grandpa silently leaves the room.

Part of me wants to criticize this man for disturbing us. I realize the faster we make it to Xeno, the sooner I’m safe and can go home.

Even though Willis has sent someone to watch over her, I’m worried about Carol.

I don’t trust adults anymore. They’re not infallible like they lead you to believe. Every adult I know has a moral compass pointing south.

I head up through Opa’s army to the top of the ship. I find Opa unbuttoning his uniform shirt, letting the wind whip at his scarred chest. I realize I may have given him too much to drink. He seems to be enjoying himself. He’s ghostly pale with his silver hair, and the shirt blowing in the breeze makes him look like a wind-struck albino.

“Air feels good.”

Opa performs a quick work of necromancy to summon a cane. It rises out of the floor from nowhere. Quite a few of the crew seem stunned by the spectacle.

Damn, how wet behind the ears can they be?

The other workers continue, picking their way across the deck and stamping down a lightning shape streamer every so many feet.

My arms feel the static-charged churning about the wood. The smell of the necromancy is already in the air. The shides around me are waiting to be activated. My necromancy crawls across my fingers, feeling like sticky putty in my hands. I’m so involved in the

sensations curling around me that I don't even notice my grandfather or the crew coming up behind me.

Everyone is staring at me expectantly, and the tall guy with the mop-style mustache taps me on the arm.

Incredibly, he's eating yet another banana. I wonder if he has a whole bushel of them stashed away from the rest of us.

"We're ready as we'll ever be. You want me to cast it now?"

I'm a little surprised Max is addressing me and not Opa. I cock my head to Opa for approval.

Opa is in no condition to do anything more than a nod. He's struggling to hold himself up on his cane. He looks wobbly. When we're in Hong Kong, he will be of no use. It worries me. How will we track down this scientist without him?

"Go ahead, let's go."

The zeppelin engineer activates the necromancy. Power hops from shide to shide. Necromancy in the shape of lightning bolts streaks across the deck. I can see the frightened faces of the crew members. Most of the non-necromancy users have a death grip on their shides. They peer around nervously, and I realize they've never disappeared into the ether before.

The mechanic from the main bridge counts down the beads on his rosary. A shattering noise reminds me of broken glass as the slivers of reality break around us. A velvety purple fog envelops the whole ship. The Nether After is being erased away in blinding white light. Every ounce of color fades from the world, leaving us entombed in a black-and-white reality where no one can move.

CHAPTER 14

WEI PROVIDENCE

Something wet, slimy, and wrong hangs around the dirigible. Even though it's invisible, I'm sure the whole crew can feel it. We all look like the page of a newspaper photograph, shadowed in grays and muted whites. We're not in the Nether After, and we're not in the human world either.

The dirigible's propellers sputtered and came to a stop. The whole zeppelin shifts to the left and then shivers to the right, trying to stabilize itself. We are riding the waves of necromancy between life and death.

My first instinct is to run to the side and look over the railing at the engines.

It's impossible. My legs and arms are entombed in Max's necromancy.

Everyone on board the ship is frozen in place. Even though we are in-between realities, it feels like the dirigible is losing altitude. Not that you can tell by the sky. Dark storm clouds race overhead and beneath us.

There is no sky. There's no land, no anything. Only a thick fog of death pushing the engine along.

Max chews on his thick mustache. He too is frozen in place. He doesn't look so good.

His skin is stark white. His breath is ragged. Sweat is pouring down his neck and arms. The photo is crushed between his fingers.

Max forces the last of his necromancy from his veins. The pilot meets my eyes. There's panic in his expression. Doesn't he know how dangerous that is? The necromancy he's cast is eating him

from the inside out. The spell drains his blood, gnawing his muscles and swallowing him whole. His skin ripples like an animal crawling around beneath the flesh.

I want to help him, to give him some of my energy. A woman's scream interrupts my casting.

The tendrils of death release me, and I whip my head around to see what's happening. I hear more screams. They seem to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Wood cracks, and the zeppelin lurches again. The fog is making it hard to see anything. The engineer whose hands were thumbing the rosary completely vanishes in front of me. Then the crew starts disappearing.

The woman dressed like Willis gives a sickening cry for help. Her arm has become trapped in the mast of the zeppelin. The tips of her fingers fall to the deck. She screeches bloody murder as the tips of her fingers slide overboard.

For some unexplained reason, I'm all right. Max stares at me, Willis, and Opa but doesn't move. Nothing feels out of the ordinary. Opa's army is suffering the same fate as the engineer. Loud explosions rock the deck. Then everything is gone. I wonder if I, too, have disappeared, lost in between the world of life and death.

That can't be right.

There wouldn't be so much dust if I were stuck in-between realities.

There is a loud scraping noise as the zeppelin smacks into a building. The world is flooded with dazzling colors. In the shadows, Max drops to his knees. There's too much noise, too much panic. I choke on the dust in the air and squeeze my eyes shut. People are running around the deck in panic. The dirigible swells as if it's about to explode. What should I do? I have no place to go.

The ship is rocking, lurching to the side. We smack into a falling skyscraper. The dirigible is scraping along the glass. It's tearing out window after window. I'm waiting for the zeppelin to burst into a fireball of death and fall to the ground.

Willis grabs hold of the dirigible controls. He turns the airship's steering column, trying to navigate it away from the falling buildings.

There's a loud bang and a hiss of air as it escapes the balloon. We're falling. I think about transferring myself home, but what will happen to everyone else?

Where is Opa?

I look from side to side of the boat. I don't find him. The deck lurches downward. There's a twenty-story drop to the ground below.

Finally, I glimpse my grandfather. My inebriated grandfather struggles to hold on to the railing with his cane. His hands are slipping. I let go of the sail I'm gripping onto and let myself slide down the deck. My knees crash into the railing on the side of the zeppelin. I grab Opa by the arm and can't even feel his weight, thanks to the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I grab him by the belt and haul him onboard the ship. Another crewman begins to fall. I recognize the woman whose arm was fused into the mast. Her arm has been cleaved off at the shoulder. She has nothing to hold on to keep her from falling. When I'm sure Opa is safe, I reach out and grab her too. I shield the two of them with my body and brace for impact.

KABLAM.

Splinters of wood go flying everywhere. I feel them dig into my fingers. I don't let go. I stare down at the soldier girl with the missing arm.

"You ok?" I gasp.

It's a stupid question to ask. The blond girl is bleeding out everywhere. Her eyelashes flutter as if she's about to pass out.

I yell at her and try to grip her arm to stop the bleeding. It doesn't work. Instead, I strip off my military-style jacket and tear down the sleeve to form a tourniquet. It's not as easy to do as you would think, I messily bind it onto her arm, but it does little to stop the blood. Luckily I'm not the only person treating the wounded.

Soldiers are attending to their own, all with more presence of mind than me. The medics drape fresh pandora vials over the necks of the injured. I wish I knew where they were getting them from.

I need one for the soldier girl.

Opa is thinking the same thing. He takes his pandora vial off his throat and wraps it around the neck of the girl.

“She can use this vial. It’s fresh. I haven’t used it yet.”

Part of me wants to tell Opa he should keep his vial for himself.

I can’t say it in front of this woman. She’s no older than my sister Geraldine. She’s lost her arm.

Someone knocks me away. I realize the big black hands reaching down for me belong to Willis.

“Aldrich? Are you ok?”

Opa nods, but he doesn’t look ok. He’s pale as a ghost. I whisper to Willis to get him a pandora vial. Willis jackrabbits off and returns with the vial.

Opa slaps it down to the broken wood of the zeppelin.

“What is wrong with you? Quit fussing over me and take care of the rest of the men. Faust and I will take care of the girl here.”

I break out of my stupor and help the young woman uncork her vial. Opa seems unconcerned as he gets up and stretches his legs. He’s not so much looking at the wounded but taking in his surroundings.

“I haven’t been to Hong Kong for years. I always wondered what happened to it. Did it look this bad before we crashed a zeppelin into it?”

I nod, not knowing what else to say.

My father told me never to come here because it was dangerous. The vultures could collect the necromancy from the souls who died here.

I can see why.

The buildings look ready to collapse. Since all the skyscrapers are so tall, it will cause a domino effect if one topples.

I can’t believe people used to live this way. One on top of

another with not an inch of grass in sight. I see nothing but mountains of ripped-up concrete and rebar sticking out of nearly everything. For some reason, I had imagined the radiation from the nuclear meltdown would make this place glow bright green.

I had pictured there would be glowing ghosts and glowing flowers, and maybe even the concrete would be luminescent.

Hong Kong is not like the glowing city of my dreams. The town looks like the target area of a bombing run. Mountains of garbage taller than me are everywhere. The crazy thing is I can't identify any of the trash I'm looking at. Vines and trees are ripping through the garbage, taking back what was once man-made and reclaiming it for nature. The street signs are covered with moss. Vegetation crawls up the skyscrapers.

It feels out of touch, out of time.

There could be spirits around, uncollected souls. I'm so panicked I doubt I would feel any of them. My necrotic empathy reaches out, only to find a whisper in the breeze.

I hear it more clearly when I squint my eyes.

"We were abandoned. No one came to save us. No one will ever come."

I see no spooklings wandering about. I can't tell which direction the voices are coming from.

With the entrance we made, I don't blame them. If I were a ghost and saw people appear out of thin air and drop to the earth in a destroyed zeppelin, I'd stay hidden too.

Far off, maybe miles away in the mountains, I can feel the presence of a few living humans. My keen eyes search the mountain range for lights, but I find none.



“Faust, the archive. Where is it?” Opa asks.

I nearly jump out of my skin. I look around, unsure where he is, then pat my vest pocket. My inkwell and shides are still tucked inside. Somehow the inkwell has survived the fall unscathed. I can hear the softest clink of the ring inside the bottle.

I’ve got the photo archive on me. It’s hidden.

Opa relaxes.

“We need to get moving if we’re going to find Doctor Wu.”

“Dr. Wu?”

I’m confused by Opa’s choice of words.

Does Opa still want to find Dr. Wu after all this? How can he be thinking about looking for the doctor right now? Crew members everywhere are hurt, possibly on the brink of death. Opa seems unconcerned.

The old man commands his sentries to start clearing debris.

For the first time, I notice coffins poking up through the wreckage of the zeppelin.

Not merely one coffin. There are hundreds.

There are charon severely injured around us, and they could die.

Opa seems more interested in rescuing the coffins from the dirigible. He orders the men to stack them up. Somewhere in the pyramid of coffins is my mother. I turn my head away, unable to guess which is hers. I’m concerned about Mom too, but Mom is already dead. What about the living?

My eyes fall on Max, who is crumpled on the ground. No one is checking on him. I don’t know why. When I reach down to wake him, I understand.

His eyes have turned milky white, and they stare up into a cloudless blue sky, unseeing. I wonder if Max could see his incredible accomplishment or if he drowned in the waves of necromancy. I run my fingers over his lifeless eyelids, shutting them forever, but they spring open. A few coins from my pocket will fix that. I lay them on his eyes.

Opa catches what I’m doing.

“Is he alive,” Opa asks. His voice doesn’t sound too concerned.

“He’s dead,” I whisper.

“No worries, Faust, All is not lost. We can resurrect him as well.”

There’s something unsatisfying about Opa’s words. I’m cold and exhausted, and my skin still itches with the unspent necromancy hanging in the air. This is wrong. I know this doesn’t seem right. I

look back to the increased number of coffins piling up. Why are there so many if we only bring my mother back as proof of Dr. Wu's concept?

Has Opa promised these soldiers he will resurrect their loved ones too?

That must be the answer. My hands ball up into fists. "Boy, don't move." I hear Willis yell at me.

My senses come alive, and I feel something dead encroach on me.

Is it a spookling?

No.

Years of necromancer training make me want to do the opposite of what Willis said. I reach out again with my necrotic empathy, but I feel nothing. A hulking shadow looms over me.

Could it be another charon?

The only thing I feel is death. There's no soul in it. It feels like a hollow pot constructed of something unnatural and dead. A hush falls over everyone. All their weapons are pointed at whatever's behind me. I hear movement as the shadow lumbers closer. A glob of slime drips onto my torn sleeve.

Whatever is behind me reeks of used diapers. It's all I can do not to whirl around and face him.

"You're doing great, Faust. Hold still a little longer." Opa urges.

Something malicious flickers in Opa's eyes, and his hands glow. I can't even see his fingers through whatever necromancy he's summoning.

In an instant, everything turns blindingly red.

I'm drowning in a sea of blood. A wave of thick orange liquid engulfs me. Spikes explode from my spine. Whatever it was behind me bellows in pain.

"Run Faust, run now," Willis commands.

The non-magic users are readying their rifles. Necromancers have started spells of their own. Willis has an ugly ball of green goo dripping from his fingers. I don't wait for him to throw it. I run. A

sharp rebar pierces my shoe's sole as I scramble over chunks of broken asphalt. There's no time to think. Whatever is behind me hasn't stopped, even after being struck by Opa's curse.

The soldiers open fire.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a shide. I look at it and see I'm holding a transport shide I inked out last night. It takes less than a second to activate. I feel my limbs become lighter than air. I'm moving faster. I bound over the terrain with gunshots echoing behind me.

Somehow Willis has caught up with me.

His Tommy gun makes a staccato chop as he shoots at whatever is chasing me. Even with death close on my heels, all I can think about is the sound of the gun and how much I hate it. An image of the little girl who died at Opa's house flashes into my mind.

I hear her cold voice say, "Serves you right. I hope you're mows you down too."

Willis's necromancy slips over me, forming an armor spell. The protection spell encases me and snaps on another layer of shielding. Stray bullets ricochet off my body. I race toward a group of overgrown trees that have broken through the pavement. Huge chunks of wood explode from the trees. I run until the noise of the gunfire recedes behind me.

Opa's necromancy reaches out, bending the concrete away from me. For an instant, the whole world seems to pause. A whirlwind of trash and re-bar spirals out of control. The dust burns my eyes and fills my lungs.

What the heck? Did Opa summon a tornado?

A whip of wind stretches in front of me, clearing the ground of obstacles. The dust has taken on an anthropomorphic form of a claw. A dark hand made of vapor and cloud rips by me, making contact with something wet and pulpy.

It sounds like a giant insect being squished.

The 'chrat chrat chrat' of the gunfire has caught up with me and is hammering in my ears.

I can't keep running at this pace. I need to make a stand.

Even if I wanted to hit whatever is chasing me, I can't see anything with Opa's necromancy whirling around. There's nothing but dust. I plant my feet in the remains of something long dead. When I pivot left to unleash the spell, there's nothing there, only a shadow retreating behind a pile of debris.

Opa's hands are in the air.

Someone in bright red leather has a sword pointed at his throat.

Opa's men have their hands raised too.

"What the heck is going on?"

Willis is about ten feet from Opa. A glinting katana is scraping his dark stubble. Realization hit me. I know that Samurai-style armor.

The Xeno Leiche Guard is holding Opa hostage.

CHAPTER 15

THE MYSTERIOUS DOCTOR WU

My Opa and his men are surrounded. Luckily no one has spotted me in the overgrown tree line. From my vantage point, I can see the soldiers down on their knees with their hands laced behind their heads.

All that necromancy being cast must have summoned the Guard to investigate. It means my old man could be here too if they're here. I search through the faces, seeing if I can spot someone in control.

For a moment, I think I see my father's big framed glasses.

My breath catches in my throat as I realize the man I'm looking at isn't him.

Some big fellows in full samurai armor surround Willis. The rest of Opa's soldiers are being corralled together like livestock by a group of red-robed necromancers. Opa jerks his head, urging me to run, but I don't move.

I'm focused on the golden-skinned samurai with a sword leveled at my grandfather's throat.

I can't leave him here.

Something catches in my pocket, and my shide collection falls to the ground. As I reach down to scoop them back up, one of them is dangled in front of my eyes. It burns away in a woman's hand next to my throat.

Green painted nails run across my neck, tickling my skin over my Adam's apple with necromancy.

"I wouldn't make a lot of movement. This necromancy can lop off your head."

The woman cackles like a murder of crows. It takes me a minute to realize she's speaking Xenese.

Her opposite hand digs a sharp object into my rib cage. I'm tired of being poked with swords.

I speak without thinking. "I don't know who you are, but this is my territory. You so much as scratch me, every Leiche Guard from Xeno will descend on this place like a flock of wild vultures. My father's Guards will peel the flesh from your bones and won't leave until the soul birds have picked you clean."

"I'm surprised you speak Xenese," the woman whispers into my ear. "No shit, as I said, this is my territory."

I hate using my father's name, but I do it anyway.

"I'm Mortimer Thaed's son."

"Don't you mean Calipso Thaed's son?"

I whirl around to look at her. The knife drags across my ribs and catches her by surprise. The necromancy falls from her palm. I've broken her concentration. I reach for one of my curses. Opa yells out at me.

"Faust, don't hurt Doctor Wu."

That doesn't stop me from whipping a shide and striking it in necromancy. It glows brighter than any of my shides have ever glowed. The paper immediately burns away in flames, leaving me with a fiery whip.

I'm ready to use it, too. A little piece of Flossie licks through the flames. I'm holding something linked to her sickness. The flaming whip immediately turns a putrid shade of green.

"Let my grandfather go, or else she gets a plague spell right between the eyes. I don't care if I kill her."



The red leather samurai have no clue what to do. I crack the

flaming whip menacingly at the good doctor's face. A few lower their pikes and spears, but the one with the katana on Opa, refuses to give up.

He spreads his feet wide, preparing to lop off Opa's head.

The oversized samurai reminds me of the story about the legendary horseman Genghis Kahn. His boots grind into the remains of the city. Without turning around, I hear him bellow out. "Why are you helping these mongrels cross our borders? Have you no pride?"

I'm surprised when the doctor gives a delicate little laugh. It seems inappropriate, but she doesn't look the least bit concerned.

"Everyone simmer down," she scolds.

Now that I have a moment to think, I realize she's also wearing a red leather samurai costume. Her black hair is tied with a long scarf, and her eyes glint with unspent necromancy.

She doesn't seem malicious. It's more like she knows something the rest of us don't.

"Han, lower your katana. The boy is Calypso's son. He and the old man have apparently come looking for me."

Doctor Wu huffs and swats at a mosquito buzzing around her neck. She doesn't seem the least bit concerned that I'm still holding a spell that could dissolve her stomach from the inside out.

"Faust, did you see where my experiment got off too? We were following it until your people started shooting at us."

"How do you know my name?"

Doctor Wu flicks her necromancy away like she is chipping off the polish on her nails.

"It doesn't take a genius to figure out pumpkin orange eyes, about thirteen years old. Not to mention you have the same brooding pout your mother had. You're the spitting image of Calypso."

Several dragons nod and shuffle Opa and his men closer to us.

"Calypso used to talk about her kids all the time. She said you were the funny one."

I crack the whip again menacingly. I want this woman to shut up.

Because if what she's saying is true, my mother died trying to protect this witch. There is no way. Mom would throw our family away to see some taboo research experiment continue. I can't accept that. No, I won't accept that.

Dr. Wu bursts out laughing.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to cackle like a hyena. You're too young to be so serious. No one your age can be the stone-hard killer you pretend to be. What are you, Thirteen? Fourteen?"

"Fifeteen," I shout indignantly, but I realize it makes me sound childish. I don't know what I should do. Should I keep standing here with my spell gripped with my fingers or surrender to her? Evidently, I'm not the only person feeling patronized. Willis is arguing with his captors.

"We weren't shooting at you. We were after the monster trying to eat the boy."

This is news to me. I know something had been hunched over me, slobbering all over my uniform, but for Willis to call it a monster? What the heck would he consider to be a monster?

My mind goes to my father and what he's been cooking up in the basement laboratory. I wonder if one of his mutant spiders has escaped. Surely it couldn't make it to the human world. How would it get this far south? Then again, who knows what my father's mutants are capable of?

"He's not a monster. It's one of the humans we resurrected. He doesn't know what he's doing. His body contains high levels of several different hormones that are causing him to run amok."

"Then the treatment doesn't work?" Opa whispers.

The old man crashes to the ground covering his face. This news is too much for him. His frail body can no longer support his weight.

"Aldrich?" Willis knocks over the samurai and drags Opa up from the ground.

Dr. Wu raises her hand to stop chaos from breaking loose again. She looks the two over curiously.

“My treatment works absolutely fine. It’s not perfected for humans yet. The charon, who have undergone the procedure, have come back right as rain. Even Han here has undergone it. Besides an extra muscle layer and an obscene appetite, he’s perfectly healthy.”

Han flexes his muscles. The soldiers all laugh as he goes through various bodybuilder poses. Dr. Wu gives me a pat on the shoulder, smiling brightly.

I dispel the whip I’m holding.

I wonder if she notices that I flinch away from her. She gives me a clueless smile and continues babbling on.

“Guess it’s no use. We won’t be able to recapture Big Po today.” Willis glares at Dr. Wu, threatening death.

“Some monster is on the loose among the humans, and you’re not going to try and recapture it as quickly as possible?”

Dr. Wu rolls her green eyes, giving him a droll look.

“You think you can survive the high mountain forests at night? Go right ahead bucko.”

“I’m sure we can have your hoodlums pick your bones out of Big Po’s morning bowel movement. Far as I’m concerned, having that empty corpse running amuck allows us to gather more research material. Po’s not harming anyone but the occasional human. The humans have been warned he’s out there. He’s doing an excellent job of keeping them away from our research compound.”

“The flesh bags are happy to give us their best sake for their protection,” Han yells out to his men, and all of them cheer.

“Where did you find these idiots?”

Dr. Wu is happy to reply. “These men were all friends of your mother. They came here to protect me over five years ago. We’ve become a tight-knit family since then.”

The word ‘family’ causes my nostrils to flair in anger. So the humans all know about the charon secret police, who are extorting

the locals for alcohol and supplies.

What the hell was my mother thinking? Charon can't reveal themselves to ordinary people. They can't live in the human world either. A shide balls up in my fingers, and I feel the paper burn away. I don't know what I plan to do, but I've heard enough. I'm surprised when the big guy Han ribs me with his elbow. He says something in Xenese, thinking Opa and Willis won't understand.

"I can almost smell your brain overheating. You need to give that little hamster in there a break. Don't worry so much. We're gonna resurrect your mommy. Same as they brought me back. Where is your mother? I'm sure you didn't come to the party without bringing her corpse."

"Calypso is at the crash site," Opa announces in perfect Xenese. It catches Han off guard.

He tests Opa's knowledge of our language, telling him he will send his men to collect the remains.

Opa answers him back fluently.

"Ok, we'll get them as soon as possible. We need to get the rigs moving first."

Han and his men move leaves and junk from three large mounds.

Some large diesel-style vehicles come into view. The only thing holding them together is rust and spotty welding.

"We've borrowed some transports from the humans to help us blend in. Faust, if you would be so kind as to come with me, please." Dr. Wu says, grabbing me by the arm.

She doesn't wait for me to respond. Instead, I'm being hauled into one of the rolling tubs. The engines sputter to life with a few coughs and dead starts.

"You must be worried about your mother. I'm sure you must have tons of questions needing to be answered. Feel free to ask me anything."

I can't think of a single thing to ask. My mother is in one of those stacked coffins back there. They are probably scooping her up

and dropping her into one of these dirty vehicles.

Lucky for me, my Opa has tons of questions about the process. I listen to him ask things, and his smile grows bigger and bigger. I can tell he thinks all this will work. Doctor Wu sounds very educated and convincing when she talks about her experiments.

So why am I not happy?

I sit silently as our vehicle bounces over broken concrete, taking us through what used to be Pok Fu Lam in the Hong Kong suburbs.

Everything is overgrown with trees. The light barely shines through the thick canopy. Many beautiful homes have been reduced to little more than kindling. Tree branches uproot both cars and homes, ripping up the foundations of buildings.

Nature has taken back Hong Kong. Life continues to go on even after the radiation has chased away all the humans. I look over my shoulder, feeling others are watching me. Opa's men are entirely preoccupied with getting the wounded zeppelin crew members to safety.

Opa looks more alive than ever. I wonder how the heck he's able to pull off such a good illusion. Maybe realizing he will be able to complete this cockamamie scheme has put him in good spirits.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

Instantly Han stiffens.

"We must cut through the human civilization to reach Dr. Wu's laboratory. It sits on the outskirts of town."

"You've been living among the cattle?" Willis snarls.

It couldn't be more obvious how disgusted Willis is. This is probably hard for him, considering his duty as a Leiche Guard is to prevent this sort of thing from happening.

"We're going to drive straight through them? Won't that be conspicuous?" I ask.

Han eyes me warily. "Not if they think we're human as well. They are small-minded creatures. If you even look remotely like them, you must be human. Humans can't comprehend there are others out there."

This makes me more uneasy. I don't want to end up in front of the Eternal Court because of Opa. Everything about this feels wrong. Willis must have picked up on this too.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa... You expect me to take my men through the sheep and not have anyone suspect anything weird is going on?" he protests.

"Some of my guys have wood stabbed through their limbs and need surgery. You don't think it will alert the cattle something freaky is happening?"

Han stops the vehicle. He grabs a few thick tarps from the back, marches back to one of the cars carrying the wounded, and flops a canopy over everyone.

"There, you satisfied now, Leiche Guard?"

The rueful expression Willis gives says anything but. He's about to reply when Opa touches Willis's arm.

"We have no time for invalids. Don't you see we're on the brink of discovery?"

Doctor Wu puffs out her chest, and for an instant, she looks much younger and prettier.

"It's kind of you to notice Heir Aldrich. I think we'll get along swimmingly."

Willis isn't satisfied. "Sir, we ought to be hunting down that monster in the woods."

"Later, Willis, we'll see Dr. Wu's lab first."

"But, sir."

"You and your men can hunt it down later. Surely it won't be too difficult for you."

Opa rubs his silver stubble before feeling the need to explain to Dr. Wu.

"My soldiers are trained to combat necromancers. They can take down your monster. Perhaps you should explain to us what caused that human to grow so large," says Opa.

I thought the thing behind me was bigger than me. Since I never did get to see what it looked like, I'm clinging to details mostly

because I don't want my mother to turn into a seven-fingered monster. What would Opa think if he found out I'm having second thoughts? I don't want my mother to go through the experiment.

No one is listening to me, and I feel I have no voice of my own.

Dr. Wu grins and gives her a girlish little laugh.

"Unfortunately, one of the experiments went awry. That lumbering beastie is what I'm calling a Windego. It's what happens when you resurrect a human without a soul. We had his body, and I thought the spirit would return to it once he had life, but I was mistaken. Poor Wei Po never found his way home. You see, Mortimer's soul birds had already collected him."

"So this Wei Po, was he a huge man in life?"

"No, no, not at all. When we pumped him full of the chemicals and planned on reattaching his soul to the body, he ballooned after that. Then, of course, there is his desire for food."

"He's dead. What kind of appetite can he have?" Willis snorts.

"Wei Po will eat anything. The more he consumes, the bigger he gets. I'm sure it has something to do with what he's missing."

"You mean his soul," I say darkly.

"So you're telling me you've created a ghost who doesn't have a mind to tell it what it needs. Well, that's just fantastic great invention doc." Willis says, disgusted.

"Oh, Wei Po knows what he wants. It just happens to be food, and he's constantly stuffing things in his mouth. It makes no sense, I know. Ghosts don't even need to eat."

What makes Willis and the doctor think that? Oh yeah, they don't hang out in the spirit district like I do. The ghosts back home are continually eating. Why would it be any different for Wei Po? Mrs.

Wang's words stand out in my head. "Be more gentle, Faust. They don't all know they're dead."

It all clicks into place.

The monster doesn't know he's dead. He has had no other ghosts to speak with or a charon to bring him into the underworld. So the

guy doesn't know what he is. Wei Po is hungry for life, and because he's missing his soul, he's trying to suck the life out of others to fill the hole in his belly.

I'm disappointed I didn't see the monster everyone is talking about. I was too busy trying to run.

Maybe I could have reasoned with him.

I never expected to hear what comes from my grandfather next. "Remarkable. So not having a soul makes a creature like that. We must see that they always have their souls intact in the future. So, tell me what happens if the corpse you are reanimating is of the charon race."

"That depends. What happened to your daughter after she was captured?"

"A bit of unpleasantness I don't care to speak about in front of the boy," Opa says.

"Her remains are intact," Willis mumbles.

I wish they'd stop talking about my mother like she's some curiosity. If Dr. Wu doesn't shut up, I'm going to rip her hair out. My fists ball up at my sides. I find myself holding my breath and biting my tongue.

I wait for the first tree limb I see and crack it out of my way. The branch splinters into fragments.

Willis and Opa must duck their heads to keep from being hit. "What's wrong with you?" Willis bellows at me. I give him a dirty look.

It's not his mother, everyone is talking about experimenting on. A sick feeling washes over me. I don't know what to do other than to go along. I don't want this. Mom traded our family for this horrible woman and her procedure.

"Spitting image of Calypso. Even has her temper," Han comments, and several of his men agree with him.

Dr. Wu looks at me, amused. "Don't go getting all pouty. We'll get your mother back for you."

"Honestly, I expected your older sister Geraldine to come

looking for me first. I never imagined her middle child would. There're no worries from here on out, Faust. Everything is going to work out fine. You'll have your mother back the same as she was in a few days. You can go home and be a family again."

I can't breathe, and I'm trembling all over. I don't like this woman saying these things and talking as if she knows all about my family, about my life. The familiarity is disgusting and reminds me of someone.

I can't remember who.

Willis puts his massive arms over my shoulder. "You ok son?"

Oh that's who. "No Willis, I'm not ok."

Willis gives me a warning look. "You and I can talk about it once everyone is settled in. Until then, why don't we keep a low profile in front of the humans?"

I give a reluctant nod as the human settlement comes into view.

CHAPTER 16

UNEARTHED

People in the streets don't notice as the banged-up old military vehicles roar through their town. This must be a common occurrence for them.

The human settlement is made of wooden shanties and makeshift housing. There doesn't seem to be any electricity or running water. I see a few folks dumping chamber pots out onto the clay roads. Others carrying firewood go on about their daily routines.

"I want you all as quiet as church mice," Willis yells to his men.

Not one of Willis' soldiers makes a move or even a groan. They stay under the tarps in complete silence. I keep waiting for one of the tarps to blow off the vehicles. Or for one of the humans to point and stare at us, but nothing like that happens. They keep going about their business as if this is normal.

My nerve-wracking ride through the village can't end soon enough. I stare at every human, wondering if they know what we are. Worrying my father's guards will show up any second and haul us away in stocks.

My mind keeps drifting to Carol and what she would think. It was stupid to believe we could become a family again, that everything would return to normal.

I don't understand why I've continued with this ridiculous scheme.

When the vehicle pulls to a stop, I jump off and immediately walk away from everyone. I don't know where I'm going but I need time to think. After a good fifteen minutes of wandering around, I

find a cemetery.

I'm relieved it's not like the European cemetery bordering my grandfather's backyard. These are the traditional burial mounds with little headstones and incense holders.

Unfortunately, I'm not alone.

Men are digging up the burial mounds. I watch them with a hint of anger festering under my skin.

"Faust?"

I whip around, ready to lash out at whoever has followed me. "What do you want?"

Willis takes a seat next to me on one of the shrines and looks at it curiously before settling in.

"Something ain't right with you."

"It's a lie, right? You can't resurrect the dead. That woman is a con artist. My mother didn't die for some stupid scientist out to break the law and destroy our way of life."

Willis lets out a loud breath. "Then I take it you're not happy about these experiments. Heck, I can't imagine anyone being ok with someone conducting tests on their mother's corpse."

What I want to say is my mother isn't a corpse. This is the lie I've been feeding myself this whole journey. I spew out all my thoughts in a single breath.

"I keep expecting my mother to jump out from somewhere. For all this to be some deranged practical joke. That's not going to happen. That woman keeps telling me she can bring my mom back to life and everything will be perfectly normal. But it's all a lie. Nothing is ever going to be normal again. My mom is dead."

My mom is dead... So why the heck am I still here? I ask myself, then repeat it out loud.

"Why am I here?"

Willis looks like he's unable to process all I've told him. He answers with an "Err, what?"

"Tell me why I'm here. I'm not particularly good at necromancy. I'm still a shade user. My mom is dead. We're running this fool's

errand trying to bring her back. Everywhere I go, I'm surrounded by people dying. Why am I here Willis? What part of this mission am I needed for? Why did Opa bring me along?"

Willis only shrugs at me. "You don't like what you're seein'. Think how it is for me."

Willis digs into his pocket for a knife and cleans the mold off the cemetery marker. After two long scrapes, he continues.

"I realize you're hurtin' kid. Maybe I ought to be thinkin' about what's best for you in this situation instead of what's best for your granddad. Tell me, Faust. I want to know what you want out of this. You want your Opa to resurrect your mom?"

I answer without a second thought.

"No. It's wrong. They are going to hurt her. She's going to become like that thing in the woods."

Willis doesn't say a word. He stares at me, and we have this weird moment of understanding one another, which makes me super uncomfortable. I kick the sole of my shoe through the mud, imprinting my heavy tread on the ground. When I can't stare at my feet anymore, my eyes fall on the gravediggers.

Willis and I watch them remove shovel after shovel full of dirt. They break open the coffins and pile the unearthed bodies onto a cart. The stench is incomparable to anything I've ever smelled. Like rotten food and bile all mixed up in sacks full of worm meat.

"You think they're gathering bodies for that witch?"

"You want me to put a stop to it?"

I think momentarily, realizing Willis brought the big bass guitar case. I understand what those words mean to a Leiche Guard who feels our way of life is being shit upon. What're a few more dead bodies to someone who hates humans and ghosts as much as him? I think well before I open my mouth.

"We should leave them alone. It's not their fault they've come in contact with that con artist."



Willis doesn't seem all too thrilled with my decision. All the same, he loosens his grip on the case and lets it slide to the ground.

"Do you think this is appropriate? Exhuming all these human graves? They're cleaning out the cemetery and selling the corpses to Dr. Wu for cash."

The idea of Doctor Wu with all these bodies doesn't sit well with me.

"Did they ask the families' permission before they started exhuming the graves?"

"Nope." Willis takes a long hard breath before continuing.

"Han said this cemetery belonged to an old prison. The way Dr. Wu talks. There isn't a person buried here who wasn't a murderer or a rapist. It seems too convenient of a story. What do you think?"

Do you think they would build this huge elaborate cemetery for a bunch of murderers? Do the townies have the right to sell them? After all, do the bodies belong to them? Even if they do, there is still the prospect you could be bringing a murderer back from the dead. How would that serve humanity?"

Willis must be thinking about telling the Eternal Court about this.

"You can't say anything to anyone about this place." I plead.

Willis turns around, shocked. "Of course not."

"The Eternal Court won't forgive anyone who participates in this kind of research. When they find out about the monsters, they'll kill me, you, and all the men and women involved. All because Opa has this idea, Dr. Wu can extend the human condition."

"No matter how much I love. Err...like your grandfather, I can't keep looking the other way," Willis says.

"Then what will you do?" "Not sure,"

Willis is scuffing his shiny black boots in the dirt. He refuses to look at me.

The workers at the carts begin to yell. Willis squints his eyes, trying to see what's going on. The diggers do the most peculiar thing. They drop to their knees. I cock my head to get a better view. One of the men down below lets out a girlish cry as he falls to the ground.

"What do you think is going...?"

My voice is cut off as a long skeletal hand wraps around my ankle.

CHAPTER 17

HUNGRY GHOSTS

The fingers popping through the cemetery soil are encrusted with mold. The hands of the creatures seem much too long. The skin is a leathery white. I'm too shocked to move. I stand frozen, staring at the ghostly hands reaching for me.

"Grab a weapon," Willis yells as another set of hands sprouts from the cemetery beds.

The arms claw at Willis's legs. He stomps on the long ghostly fingers crunching them beneath his boots.

I look at Willis in shock.

"Where am I supposed to find a weapon?" I yell back.

Willis is too busy smacking off whatever has climbed onto his back. The creature's head is much too large for its body. It is emaciated from hunger. What bothers me most is the thing's eyes. They're large and black. Empty except for a glimmer of malice. I dance away as more of the creatures begin rising from the ground. I start to fumble through my shide papers. Then out of nowhere, Willis knocks them out of my hands onto the upturned earth. He drives a sword straight into a ghost's skull, and it shatters into dust.

"Mortimer hasn't taught you anything, has he? You need cold iron to fight desecrated spirits."

Willis's words are not making sense.

I've captured every sort of ghost out there, but these giant-headed creatures are nothing like the ones I've encountered. They are more substantial than ghosts and not as brainless as some staggering zombies. They are quick on their tiny limbs. Their long fingers are almost as sharp as the blade of a knife.



Willis brandishes the dress sword at the bobble-headed spooks. With the grace of a fencer, he spears them through.

Until now, I thought the sword was only a showy piece of Willis's uniform but obviously, it has more practical uses. I can feel the necromancy radiating off the blade.

Willis slashes at another spook.

Since I am a soul harvester and can use necromancy, I don't even carry so much as a pocket knife on me. I'm unsure where to find a weapon lying in the cemetery.

I don't see so much as a tree branch I can use as a club, which wouldn't be helpful anyway.

In the distance, the sound of a train clacks against the rails. The boards beneath my feet shiver. I catch sight of a locomotive plowing toward me. I jump off the tracks as the train rips by, trapping me and Willis into the cemetery. The night is filled with a wailing blast from the horn and the spooks who are clambering up from their burial mounds.

If I use my necromancy to disappear into the ether, it will alert my father's Leiche Guard.

I look for another way out, but we are surrounded by high mountains and steep cliffs. The burial markers give us little room to

fight.

The howling locomotive blocks the only way out. The train throws sparks as the wheels grind down the railing. I have no clue what to do.

The desecrated remnants have surrounded Willis. Even with my supernatural strength, I can't reach down and uproot one of the railroad tracks as a weapon. I don't have a shield drawn for superhero-style feats, but I know I'm onto something.

"Find something made of cold iron to use as a weapon," Willis yells.

His uniform is drenched in sweat. He smashes the Tommy gun case into one of the spirits and plunges his sword into its neck as it attempts to get back up. Until now, the spirits haven't paid too much attention to me. Two shades tear away from Willis. They run straight at me, bald heads ready to batter me to the ground. They move like spiders bounding from one cemetery marker to the next.

Willis gives me a glance over his shoulder. The spook's necks crack over to the side. Their skins glisten like wet leeches. The creepiest thing about these spooks is their mouths. It's like someone has erased their lips. Only small pin-size holes exist where their mouths should be.

Their pinprick size mouths make high-pitched whistles.

More spirits rise from the broken concrete. I see them gathering together like a swarm of insects. The first of the spirits smack into me. It uses its bulbous cranium as a battering ram and knocks me to the dirt.

I look to Willis for help, but he has his own problems. There's nothing I can use as a weapon. The only thing around me is a fallen barbed wire fence.

The ghost on top of me is driving its long fingers into my ribs. Each of his fingers feels like an ice-cold knife digging into my flesh. I cover my face with my arms and wrap my hand around the barbed wire.

With all my strength, I tug it in front of me. The ghost magically

turns to dust. I don't have time to contemplate how or why it happened. I search my vest pockets. Between my fire shide and my earth shide is a metallic one. I hold the streamer up between my fingers. Slowly I get up from the ground.

The unearthly wind caused by my necromancy nearly rips it away. I tear my fingers into the paper, holding onto it. I think only about the cold iron. The necromancy goes to work, lifting the spikes from the railway ties. They jettison away from the moving train and circle me with deadly accuracy. The barbed wire I pulled on untangles itself from the wooden fence post. The wire coils in the air around me like angry snakes. I would've sworn the wire was aluminum, but I don't question it.

I reach out and grab the wire with my bare hand. Not a moment too soon, either. Some of the spirits have broken through Willis's line of defense. A painful scream comes from one of the humans lying on the ground as a spirit lies into him. I can see the spookling tear into his bowels, digging out the man's organs with his ghostly talons. It futilely tries to stuff its sewn-up mouth with the man's guts.

Willis has picked up some long scratches across his ebony skin. He doesn't scream or make so much as a word of complaint. Even though blood is gushing from his wounds, he fights on, trying to get down to the humans. For every ghost Willis exorcises, another reaches up from the soil to take its place. I realize he can't keep up this maddening pace of necromancy and weapon use.

I coil the wire in my hand and feel my necromancy leave me. My magic is draining into the cold iron.

Dizziness grips me, and the whole world tilts. The feeling is disturbing like something is stealing away my life. With my heart throbbing in my ears, I spear a fire shide with the barbed wire. I still have control of my other spell.

I don't waste time. I imagine the wire biting someone like a snake. It strikes out, seeking the ghosts surrounding Willis. It encircles a squashed-faced ghost's throat, cleaving off the spirit's

head and leaving a golden orb in its place.

My wire constricts around one of the other spirits, ripping it asunder, and another glowing orb appears. I realize I'm doing this with my mind.

I haven't used the fire shide yet. The cold iron is moving on its own. The ghosts aren't looking at Willis anymore. They leave him crumpled on the ground and turn their attention to me.

"You want to play with me?" I whisper, not sure where my courage is coming from.

I grab hold of the wire, feeding it more of my necromancy. I swirl it around me like a whip. The spirits are entangled in it. Netted like fish. I'm not done with them yet. I pour all my anger and fear into the railroad spikes floating near my head. They shoot down the cliff like arrows, impaling the ghosts in the forehead. There is a loud clang, and the spirits' bodies crumble like stone and fall atop the dead humans.

Willis covers the gaping wound in his forehead. He bites off the cork of his pandora vile and spits it to the ground.

"What took you so long?" he snarls.

I don't know why he's yelling at me. Maybe he didn't like being pinned in by ghosts.

"I'm sorry. I've never cast any necromancy remotely similar to this before. I didn't realize what cold iron could do. When I touched it..."

"It felt like your life was being sucked away." Willis finishes for me.

He grabs the stopper of his pandora vial up from the ground. The blood is neatly folding itself back into his dark skin. He gives me a disgusted look.

"Didn't Mortimer teach you anything? This is essential combat necromancy."

"My father doesn't teach me. My sister Geraldine was in charge of my training. Geri hasn't been around much since the Eternal Court took Mom."

Willis lets out a loud sigh and looks over the remains of the grave diggers.

“You did good kid, considering you’ve never used cold iron. I’ve seen Leiche Guards, who can’t fight that well in a pinch. What made you choose barbwire?”

I blush deep red. “It was the only thing I could find. A snake was the only death offering I could think of summoning into it.”

“Well, barbwire works for you.” Willis digs out one of the railroad spikes from the crumbled remains of the ghosts. He tosses it back to me.

“Keep the iron on you. You should always have a weapon on hand. Especially since your shide offerings are so easily destroyed and taken away.”

I nod happily. Thinking this is as close to a compliment as I’ll ever get from this man.

Willis holds up his hand, and all the golden orbs left by the ghosts come to him as if tethered to him with a string. It’s a cool trick. I realize if I could have chosen anyone in the world to continue my necromancy training. I would want Willis. He’s like a rock star at this kind of stuff.

My head bobs on my shoulders. It feels much too heavy like it’s about to fall off. The world around me rocks.

“Um, Willis?” I stumble a few steps, feeling like I may black out.

“You used too much necromancy. You need to eat something.”

“Do I look like I walk around carrying fortune cookies with me?” Willis rolls his eyes.

“I meant salt. Necromancy takes a lot out of the body. Primarily electrolytes.”

Willis flicks me a salt packet, and I stare at it suspiciously. He’s probably testing me to find out how gullible I am. I rip open the packet and pour the salt onto my tongue. There is a weird metallic taste. My face puckers. Strangely enough, I feel less light-headed. The metallic taste leaves me. I don’t feel the drain of the metal anymore.

“That settles it,” Willis whispers, putting away his sword. I give him a peculiar look.

“Go to the lab and tell your grandpa you don’t want Doctor Wu experimenting on your mother’s remains.”

“What if he won’t listen to me?”

“You need to make him hear you out. Snatch her body if you have to.”

CHAPTER 18

THE CLOCK TOWER

A cold chill runs down my spine as I wander through the cemetery. Can I actually steal Mom's body from the lab? Willis seems to think so, but Willis is walking off to the human settlement. He doesn't have to actually steal Mom's corpse. I get an uneasy feeling watching Willis examining his guitar case. After dusting off the remains of the ghost he smashed with it, I see him start in the opposite direction of Dr. Wu's lab.

"Where are you going? Aren't you going to help me convince Opa?"

"Haven't you noticed he's not listening to me lately?"

Willis clears his throat before adding. "All you have to do is stall. You've got this. You can leave the rest to me."

I'm not sure what that means. I want to ask Willis more. The clacking sound of the train makes it hard to talk to him. Willis doesn't seem too keen on elaborating on his plan. As the last train car passes the cemetery, I cross over the railroad tracks. I watch Willis until he disappears into the human settlement. Maybe Willis wants to ensure none of the ghosts have trickled into their village.

I pray that's what he's doing. I smack my cheeks, psyching myself up. I know what I've got to do. I'll return to Dr. Wu's lab and wait for her return. Then I'll tell her I don't want her to resurrect my mother. I know Opa won't understand. If I explain to the scientist, she probably won't revive her. Maybe even out of spite.

When Dr. Wu asks me why, I'll tell her my mother had her chance at life, and we shouldn't go meddling with trying to resurrect the dead.

Part of me wonders what Opa will think of me for doing this. Looking at the chewed-up pile of human remains and dusted spirits surrounding me, I am more sure than ever that this needs to stop.

With my convictions set, I make my way through the jungle to Wu's lab. My clothes are plastered to my body with sweat. Even though it's dark out, the temperature hasn't changed. None of Dr. Wu's guards or Opa's men are hanging near the clock tower. The place is eerily silent. I can still hear the ticking of the truck engines as they cool. Nearly all the electricity has been turned off.

How can I make Doctor Wu and Opa listen to me? Will I need to confess everything to my old man? I can't imagine how furious he is right now. Somehow even my dad being mad doesn't scare me as much as seeing my mother return from the grave.

The hands on the clock tower are no longer keeping time. Bunches of conduit piercing through the timepiece's face are connected to generators from my own world. Pushing my anxiety into the pit of my stomach, I ascend the staircase. The tower is sweltering inside. It has the stink of old necromancy and spooklings mingling together. Creating a smell akin to spoiled kimchi.

Large clay urns are stacked along the walls going all the way up the stairs. I wonder if it's kimchi fermenting away in them. Then it occurs to me how weird that would be.

Not even Doctor Wu's band of rogues could eat that much cabbage.



The largest of the urns comes up to my belt. More of those are

stacked on makeshift scaffolding. Strangely enough, the containers are all dust free, even though the frame has a significant amount of grime on it. I resist the urge to uncap the urns and make my way up a few more flights of stairs.

“Dr. Wu sure knows how to decorate.”

The clock tower is right out of a horror novel. All Dr. Wu needs is a couple of giant spiders hanging from the ceiling.

I snort at my joke because my father’s mutant horde would love this tower. As I climb onto the clock’s access deck, I see all the cabling and gears have been redirected to another room.

I follow the wiring, assuming this must be Dr. Wu’s lab. I have to duck under the door to go inside.

The lab is a combination of cogs and moving things. I can hear the chirp of the gears rubbing up against each other as they move pistons about the room. It’s reminiscent of my father’s lab, and I can’t help but feel a little homesick. Newspapers and books are strewn everywhere. I imagine my dad passed out among the papers with a bottle of sake gripped in his hand. Could I be missing him? No... can’t be.

I shake it off. This isn’t my father’s laboratory, and my sister isn’t sleeping upstairs. Everywhere I look, shadows blanket me in whirling darkness. All the moving parts put me on edge. I duck as a large piece of clockwork nearly hits me in the nose.

“Faust, is that you? Come in Faust, Come in.” Dr. Wu yells.

Originally I planned to come up here and slug this woman. It’s harder to execute when you realize the person you hate doesn’t know what she’s done to piss you off. There is the distinct noise of bottles being lifted and raised, but I can’t find Dr. Wu in all the lab equipment.

I remove my jacket so it doesn’t become lodged in the turning clockworks. As I slip my arms out of the sleeves, small dark hands grab onto my coat. The shrieks and screams of monkeys fill my ears. Grubby little hands pull at me from a bank of cages. The monkeys yellowing fangs drip onto my throat as they try to yank me through

the bars.

“Oh goodness.” Dr. Wu cries.

She runs at me with a metal stick in her hand. She raises the electric prod and brings it down on the cage, burning my braids. The monkeys jump back when the sparks fly against the metal. They shriek even louder than before but huddle into the corner shrinking into the shadows.

“Earlier experiments. As you can see, they are all very much alive.”

The monkeys screech a deafening cry. Dr. Wu throws a handful of kibble into the cage. I say nothing, but I know I’ve never seen an animal that aggressive that’s treated right. She must mistreat them.



“You’re concerned. I can tell you this is a kosher operation. We don’t kill the monkeys. We let nature and humanity do that. Their adrenal gland, the fear glands, are not working properly. That’s why they act that way. For some reason, there is always an elevated cortisol level in the blood after we breathe life into them. I’m trying to fix that so we can officially begin testing on humans. For the life of me, I can’t make the adrenal glands quit secreting fear hormones into the bloodstream. That’s not important, is it? The only thing

important is the monkeys are alive and obnoxious as ever.”

Doing a quick survey of the lab, I realize Opa isn't up here reading over her research. It's comforting because I still have no clue what I can say to the old codger. Or if anything will make him change his mind.

Dr. Wu rubs her hand on her neck, stretching like she's been at work for hours.

“Your Grandpa wants to bear witness to my achievement first. We've prepared the lab to resurrect that zeppelin captain. I think your grandfather called him Marx or Mitch?”

“Max,” I mumble.

My heart skips a beat. Do they want to experiment on Max first? After all he's sacrificed that hardly seems fair. My eyes fall on the gurneys in the center of the room. My breath quickens when I count three identical stretchers bearing draped bodies. Two of the silhouettes on them appear to be men, but the third stretcher has the profile of a woman. My eyes burn into the gurney. It's exactly the same as I remember it all those years ago. Tarnished rusty side rails, thick leather belts strapping something down to the mattress. It's the bed for some escaped asylum patient.

More sweat breaks out on my neck. It must be from the heat outside.

Dr. Wu follows my gaze to the gurneys, and she smiles a little. “Of course, if you'd rather I'd resurrect your mother first. I'm sure your grandfather would concede.”

I'm about to tell Dr. Wu I don't want her to lay a hand on my mother when a woman's delicate arm slides from the gurney. It's a woman's arm, still wearing my father's matching band.

That sick witch.

I'm sure she used necromancy to move my mother's arm.

I stand zombified, unable to speak. I should tell her she isn't going to do this to my mother, but the only words that come out of me sound meek and insecure. I don't even recognize my voice.

“Can I have a minute alone with my mom? I never got to...” my

voice trails off.

Damn it, why am I telling the witch this?

Dr. Wu grins even bigger.

“Is this the first time you’ve seen your mother since she was taken from you? Oh, you poor boy, you’ve been through so much. Please don’t take too long. We want to get started on Max before he ripens. Surely you will want to have a real conversation with her. I’m sure she has all kinds of things to tell you.” Doctor Wu gives me an unwanted hug.

She slips through the laboratory and stuffs a cookie in the monkey cages for show. As soon as she leaves, my face twists into a snarl.

My feet don’t want to move at first, but then the humming of the instruments and the lull of the electricity bouncing from node to node throughout the room draws me to my mother.

“This is all your fault, you know. You left us. It was more important to protect this experiment than being with your husband and kids. Do you realize what you’ve done? You’ve damned us all. Opa’s gone crazy. Dad’s turned into a drunk crackpot. Carol doesn’t know who her mother is. Geraldine checked out and left us to fend for ourselves. Why did you do this to us? Why did you do this to me?”

No one answers. The laboratory remains blistering hot. The lightning jumping from node to node crackles in the air.

Stomping to the gurneys, I snap the sheet away and throw it to the floor. I glare at my mother’s face.

She’s got stitches all over her body. Her skin has a yellow-green cast to it. There are bruises everywhere. Somebody beat her before she died. I reach down for her hand and realize her fingernails have been removed. Her pale hair is thinner than I remember. Her lips are threaded shut.

It’s horrible. I don’t want to touch her.

My mother is right here, and I’m afraid to touch her. I’m too squeamish to even look at her.

“I’m sorry,” I yell out before I crumble to the floor beside the gurney. I bang my head against the hard metal, feeling the cool chrome sink into my skin.

“When they dragged you away, I had no clue what to do. I’m sorry Mom. I’m so sorry.”

My face feels hot. My mom’s hand is still hanging from the gurney. The leather straps are tightened across her chest and knees, lacing my mom to the bed.

I stand, and my hands fumble across the metal buckles as I try to open them. My fingertips run over Mom’s pale, slender wrists.

“I love you, mom. I want Opa and the doctor to resurrect you, but I can’t let that happen. If Opa succeeds, the Leiche Guard will torture you all over. You’ll be a lab rat for the necromancy authorities. I can’t allow this to happen.”

I’m about to lift my mother off the gurney when Dr. Wu returns from wherever she went.

“What are you doing?” She yells. She nearly trips over some wires, trying to get to the bedside. She digs her nails into my arm when she has me within reach.

“You put her down this instant.”

“I can’t let this happen. I can’t let you experiment on my mother’s corpse.”

“Why ever not?”

I realize the voice is too thick to be Dr. Wu’s. I look up to meet Opa’s eyes. His face is frozen by some unreadable emotion.

“We can make her better. Why would you not want to see her alive again?”

“Mom’s not sick, Opa. She’s dead. Someone killed her. Bringing her back disrupts the natural order of life and death. What if she comes back and she’s hurting and in pain, or she mutates into one of those monsters? Do you want to see your daughter turned into that thing lurking in the ruins?”

Opa lunges at me, making Mom slip from my hands. Her head bangs on the hard wooden floor.

Dr. Wu steps in and gathers her up, re-strapping her to the gurney.

I expect Opa to hit me, but he crushes me to his chest in a hug instead. The only problem is he doesn't loosen up. He stays that way, his arms pinning me to him.

"It's ok to be afraid. When your mother is alive, you'll see I'm right. Get her ready." Opa orders.

"What about Max? Don't you want to see the whole process first?" Dr. Wu hedges.

Opa's eyes dart to the three gurneys.

"This will make you feel better? Seeing Max return will erase all those jitters about healing your mother."

"It won't make a difference, and you don't believe that either," I yell.

Opa's necromancy slithers around my wrists. I feel them clamp down together in shackles. The cane he's holding twists into a rope around my legs. He forces me into a nearby chair.

"Han, get in here." Dr. Wu screeches.

The guard comes swooping in, pike in hand, as he sizes up the room. "I need you to help me get Max hooked up. The boy's got cold feet and Aldrich has his hands full."

Han gives me a sympathetic look, but he makes no move to help me. The oversized Adonis drags out crates of machinery and connects them to Max. What bothers me the most is the doctor hasn't told him how to hook anything up. How many times have they done this? How many failures are around in the human world? I watch in disgust as they strap a gas mask over Max's face. Han's ape-sized hands hook a hose to the respirator on the gas mask. He cranks down a lever, and an urn falls into an oversized vacuum. A human corpse falls out.

Electricity bounces from one electrical node to another, moving faster and sending sparks down to the floor.

"Time to wake him up," Dr. Wu announces. She gives Opa a quick salute. As she cranks a metal wheel, the electricity gathers

into a single bolt and bounds down to all three gurneys. The bodies on each of the gurneys begin moving. Han opens another giant urn as white gas fills Max's mask.

I see Mother's hands ball into fists. She flops about like she's having a seizure. A ripping sound fills the room as the ray hits the bodies. Opa stares intensely at my mother's body. Even though she's not even been prepped yet, her muscles are flexing.

My grandfather moves to her side and grabs her tortured hand.

"Her skin is spongy, is this normal?"

Opa runs his palm over her forehead, something any parent would do to their child. Her platinum blond hair grows longer as he touches my mother's scalp.

"Stop it. Stop it, please," I scream.

Dr. Wu doesn't look up. She's still doing something to Max with the machines. The lab fills with the putrid smell of burning hair. I rip my head around to find Opa.

"Opa, stop this. Something's wrong. She shouldn't be moving."

"The electricity is making her convulse. It isn't necromancy. It's science," Han assures me.

I'm not satisfied with Han's answer. I probe Max with my necromancy. There is nothing inside him to hold onto.

No death, no soul.

Max's head cocks to the side, and his milky white eyes pop open. His eyes swim in their sockets before locking onto me. A wave of hate-filled envy hits me.

No one else notices. They are too intent on the experiment.

The feeling of revenge is secreted from every pore in Max's body. I listen to the sickening crunch of human bones being ground up. If Max were human, I know he would turn into a ghost about now. We're charon. We don't have spirits. So how is it no one has noticed what's happening?

Electricity crackles in the air.

One of the bolts strikes Mom's gurney, then Max's.

Max's hand breaks free. His bulging muscles cleave the leather

in two as his corpse begins fighting the belts.

“He’s coming back, see Faust, it’s ok,” Dr. Wu reassures.

“It’s more than ok it’s a triumph of science.” Opa crows. His face takes on a devilish look in the crackling electricity. I try to yell at them, but a thick meaty hand clamps over my mouth, urging me to be silent.

CHAPTER 19

REINCARNATION

The chair I'm sitting in is heaved into the shadows of clockworks. I look around wildly and find Willis leaning over me. His finger pressed to his lips.

I can't be silent now.

"They're trying to resurrect Max," I say in a hushed tone.

"Soon as you're free, get your mother and run. We must get your Opa out of here before the Leiche Guard arrives."

As the words sink in, I feel all the blood drain out of my body. "You summoned the Leiche Guard?"

Is Willis off his rocker? He's going to get us all killed, but I don't have time to think. Gunfire rattles in my ears, making my teeth chatter. A constant stream of shells falls around my head. The rain of bullets carves up the machinery, throwing sparks around the room. A stray bullet hits Max's respirator releasing green fog all over the floor.

Willis has done something amazing with his necromancy. He's shielded Opa and the others. I see the bullets bounce off them, only hitting Dr. Wu's equipment.

No one seems to notice he's protecting them. Han runs at Willis with his pike. He's fixing to skewer Willis to the wall. Willis knocks the pike away with his arm. In the distraction, Opa drops his spell. I strike a shide in necromancy, and Opa's cane melts through the floor in an acid-like hiss.

"What are you doing, you fool?" Dr. Wu screeches. She runs to her machines and tries to put out the fire. Smoke licks across the ceiling of the clock tower.

I give Willis a hand by tossing a few of my railroad spikes at Han. The spikes rebound off Han's necromancy, impaling the machinery.

The next events happen in a blur I can't comprehend. Explosions start everywhere. The fire is burning through the old floorboards. Dr. Wu's machines are being overturned. I search the room for Mom's gurney.

When I look for her on the table, I can't find her. I assume she's hidden under the rolling clouds of green smoke coming from the machines.

Then I see a bit of silver in the corner. Opa's arms are wrapped around Mom. He must have grabbed her when Willis started shooting. He didn't make it far. His legs are pinned underneath one of the overturned machines. Grandfather appears to be out cold.

I want to look away, but I know if I leave them here, Opa might suffocate.

I bang into the machine knocking it aside, and try to pick both of them up. The thick green smoke fills my lungs. I feel I might hurl. I don't stop. I take one last look at my mother, and I drag Opa's unconscious form up to me and drape the old man over my shoulders. Maybe it's wishful thinking, but I swear I see my mom's chest rising and falling. I run outside and lay Opa on the ground. He's not breathing.

I roll him over on his side and bang my fist into his chest. I imagine that I've drawn the calligraphy character for air on one of my shides.

I see the ink lines swooping on a sheet of paper and activate my necromancy. Opa coughs up some of the green stuff he's inhaled. As soon as I see him breathing, I head back inside.

I intend to get my mother's body back.

When I return to the lab, I'm shocked at what I see. Max is up from the gurney, and his muscles are throbbing and growing. They're larger than any man's muscles should be. He smacks the doctor with his hulking fist.

Dr. Wu crashes into the monkey cages, bending the bars apart.

All the animals bite and claw at her. As I try to help her, I trip over something and realize the lump of bloody flesh is Willis. Considering Han is still standing, I assume the samurai was too much for him.

Willis coughs and tries to get himself up. There's so much blood on him. I don't know where he's even wounded. I'm afraid to touch him.

I uncork his pandora vial and help him to the door, but Max's mutant size arm reaches out for me. He's lumbering off balance because he's nearly tripled in size. His nails grow a good inch. They scrape the belfry floors as he walks.

I get the sense that Max is trying to speak, but his teeth are falling out with each movement of his mouth. The words come out as animalistic groans. I don't know what to do for him. I drag Willis out the door and look for the doctor and Han.

The heat of the fire is making the wood around us crack. The smoke is so thick I can't see more than a foot in front of me.

I do the most logical thing I can. I uncork my pandora vial and hope it's enough to keep me from succumbing to smoke inhalation. The hellfire that licks around me blocks my path. I begin activating my shide papers.

I use a water spell first, thinking it will extinguish the fire. The fire is so hot the water instantly creates a wall of steam. Steam backfires on me and Max.

The room fills with toxic fumes.

Max screams in pain as the bare muscles in his chest are exposed.



The steam begins to cook him. The color of his eyes fades into nothingness. He looks so angry, so intense, his eyes become as blank as a shark's. When I look into his eyes, I wondered if it's Max looking at me. I get my answer sooner than I want.

The feeling of oil pours over my skin when I reach out with my empathy. It's an awful feeling, like being smothered in balm. My necromancy curls away from me. My body has become more in tune with the situation than I am.

My necromancy shields raise without me thinking about it. Max leaps and grabs me in his huge fist. His ice-cold breath crawls over my skin. Han throws his pike at the monster. It gives me enough time to slip from Max's grasp. I run to the samurai and fish out the pandora vial circling his neck. With a quick twist, I unleash the healing power within. He staggers up to his feet.

"I don't understand. We did everything we did before. Suppose that idiot wouldn't have started shooting the machines. He would have come back," Han yells.

He tries to push Max away from the two of us. Even after executing a barrage of martial arts, all he ends up doing is making Max angrier.

Max rises from the laboratory floor. He knocks both Han and me into the wall. The floor beneath us shivers.

I look down at broken floorboards thinking the whole damn building is ready to cave in.

As I looked away, Max rips Han's arm from its socket. A sick cracking noise comes from Han's bones. The monster curls his lips and chews on Han's arm. Even his teeth have grown huge. The skin and muscle come sliding off the arm like a banana skin, and Max takes a bite of bloody flesh and bone.

No amount of necromancy training prepared me for this.

Han's shoulder is gushing blood like a waterfall. Max gives an unholy scream as he finishes consuming Han's arm. He reaches out to hit me but grabs Han instead. His fist comes down over and over again, beating him into a lump of wet flesh.

Even with his body armor, the samurai can't stand much more of this. Doctor Wu tries to use her necromancy, but she's stumbling around in the fire almost incoherently.

I strike another shide to protect the two of them.

This angers Max more.

The spell bends with each angry blow. Max doesn't seem to know he's not hitting them. Instead of dragging out another shide, I imagine a wind gust blowing Han and Dr. Wu away. The wind rips them out, throwing them onto the clock tower landing.

"You need to get out of here. The clock's going to fall," I scream.

They both look confused, probably from all the smoke they've inhaled. Their wounds are overcoming them. I'm forced to dodge Max and use my etheric transfer spell to teleport the three of us outside. As I cast the spell, the beams and gears of the clock begin to fall through us. Max isn't so lucky. He is struck by the roof of the falling clock tower as more and more debris falls above us.

I feel sorry for him. I can't save him. Unconsciously I've made a choice to protect the living over the dead. Max tries to lunge for me as we are etherically transferred.

Then the beam from the ceiling smacks him through the floor, and he's buried alive.

Me and the doctor and Han now sit in the transport vehicles watching the clock tower burn and crumble. I feel strangely empty inside, knowing I couldn't retrieve Mom's body.

Once again, my family is alone, without my mother.

Willis's Leiche Guard friends burst upon the scene. They begin rounding up Dr. Wu's guards. A few come over to see if I'm hurt. They don't bother examining Han and Dr. Wu. Instead, they take them into custody.

I seriously doubt Dr. Wu and Han will live a long and prosperous life.

I make no movement to get out of the vehicle, even when Willis comes to me.

"Your Opa is safe. He disappeared into the ether right before the

Guard showed up.”

“Will the Leiche Guard come to my house in the middle of the night and haul us all away?”

Willis shakes his head. “Not as long as our stories are straight.” The black man hops in the vehicle and sits down.

“You found out about the experiments in your territory. You contacted me for help since Mortimer is preoccupied. We came down here and investigated. We didn’t like what we saw. I went and got the Leiche Guard while you stalled.”

I try to rub some of the ash off my face. I find it’s sticky with my own sweat.

“What about the experiments? What about Max? How did he get here?”

“Who’s Max?” Willis asks, arching his eyebrows.

I realize all of this is being swept under the rug. Nobody will ever know what truly happened.

“You and I have to take this secret to the grave. Or else your grandpa will...”

I cut Willis off.

“I’ve already taken it to the grave, my mothers,” I announce.

I jump out of the vehicle and watch the flames lick the top of the skyline. Willis says nothing more. He squeezes my shoulder and walks away. I’m left staring at the burning fire until all that’s left is dust and embers.

CHAPTER 20

REBIRTH

Two full weeks pass until I talk to anyone. Dad grounded me soon as he heard I was returned to Xeno by the Leiche Guard. I've spent the last fourteen days cooped up with Carol from sun up to sun down. The only time I've been allowed out is when I have to go out snaring more necromancy for my old man. The watchful eyes of Dad's vultures seem to be everywhere nowadays. I can't even take a piss without seeing one of the birds sitting on the window sill.

My grounding has done one good thing. It's given me time to concoct a story to feed my old man.

Dad tried to beat me stupid when I first got home, but for some reason, it didn't hurt me this time. I've been walking around in a daze feeling numb all over. It's like everything that happened to me happened to someone else.

Trying to spank the truth out of me with a switch didn't have the effect my old man anticipated. Dad may think he's pretty scary. He will never be as frightening as seeing Max transform into a monster against his will. A stick will never hurt as much as that knife that went through my jaw.

There is a light scar on my face where it cleaved through my skin, but even that is diminishing. That scar is the only reason I know I didn't imagine everything. How can I explain this to my Father? Even if I could tell him anything, honestly, I don't know what to say that won't make me sound like a nutcase.

I stayed tight-lipped and emotionless the whole time.

Dad eventually wore himself out trying to be a parent and returned to drinking his sake. In return, I've been keeping my head

down, completing all my soul harvests like a good little necromancer.

The Leiche Guard hasn't paid me any unexpected visits. That makes me a little uneasy, but I'm rolling with it.

As for Opa, he hasn't sent me any more messages. I'm guessing he blames me for losing Mom. I'll probably never hear from him again. It's too bad too. After everything that happened, I'm not mad at him. I miss having him around, and I know Carol would like to see him.

I think it could be good for my old man and Opa if they took the time to hash out whatever disagreements they had so long ago. It was neither of their faults.

Mom died.

My mother made some screwed-up decisions. She put her politics before her own family and became lost to us because of it. No one, not Opa, not Dad, or me, was taken into consideration when she decided to go off and start this crazy mess. It seems I'm the only one who realizes this.

In some ways, that makes me more mature than my old man and Opa.

I console myself in knowing this whole journey. Mom was never there to lose. Calypso Thaed died long ago, most likely when they took her away. Probably the moment she decided to give up her family for that damn doctor. At least, that's what I tell myself.

No more thinking about Mom. Mother has made her choices.

In the end, they left her dead. I should be happy a huge burden has been lifted off my shoulders. I haven't smelled phantom perfumes or seen glimpses of my mom out of the corner of my eyes. Her ghost seems forever lost to me now. I'm still trying to convince myself that this is a good thing. She can't endanger me or Carol or my older sister anymore.

I don't have to wander the streets looking for her, wondering why she's gone and left us.

My only fear is that someone will discover my and Opa's secret.

There has been no word from Willis since I came home. I had hoped he'd write me about what happened to Han and the psychotic doctor, but there's been nothing.

I keep wondering if someone will find the remains of Max. Were all of Han's men captured?

I don't know these things, and it has me on edge.

It's only a matter of time before Han, and the Doctor start blabbing about Opa's and my part in the experiment.

Whenever a Leiche Guard comes to my house to speak with my father, I break out in an ice-cold sweat. All the blood drains from my limbs. Because of their frequent visits to the house, I started reading the newspaper.

There has been no mention of me, Opa, or Willis. Not even an article mentioning the experiment or Doctor Wu and Han being sent to the Asylum of the Damned.

Instead, the headlines have discussed foreign terrorism and the need for separate territory armies.

A couple of days ago, I saw a picture of some of Opa's men in the paper, but it was no one I recognized. The article seems to be more about how trendy their uniforms look compared to the old Leiche Guard style uniforms.

As if that was important.

The whole world is changing fast. I can do nothing but sit back and watch. It is so frustrating.

I need to do something other than mope around the house all day, or my paranoia will drive me insane. So I offered to take Carol to see my mother. We both agreed to get dressed up. I promised Carol we would see the last place Mother visited while she was alive.

I've not told her or my family what happened in the clock tower with Opa.

Somehow Mrs. Wang caught an ear full of mine and Carol's excursion. She believes we're having a memorial picnic. She packed the two of us an elaborate lunch.

The ghost shoved some incense in with our food, along with a couple of candles. I wish there were some way to tell my dad and older sister to come along. I don't want to keep this secret from them. They should be able to know mom's dead.

As I spot Carol in the hallway, I feel tremendously guilty.

She will be left in the dark, which bothers me.

I want to tell her everything.

I'm having a problem even looking at her. She reminds me of mom. Perhaps I feel guilty for tricking her into coming to Mom's funeral. It reminds me of something Opa would do.

Carol seems antsy and grips a bouquet of flowers bigger than her head. I wonder who gave her those flowers. It's not a bouquet a little kid would pick out. She has some weird-looking lanterns as well.

I realize these are the same type of floating lanterns I've seen humans use to help their dead find their way to the afterlife.

"You ready?" I mumble, trying to grab hold of Carol and our picnic basket. The lanterns stick out oddly in her arms. I see she's written a letter to Mom on one.

There's a blank one too. I assume that one is for me.

"Of course, I'm ready. I was born ready." Carol squeals.

She grabs hold of my leg and pinches her eyes closed. It feels inappropriate somehow. She is so excited. This is the first time she's etheric transferred anywhere. She's more interested in seeing my necromancy at work than anything I could have told her about Mom.

"Ok, let's go," I whisper as I scoop my sister up from the floor.

I let the necromancy leech over the two of us. I'm confident I can cast the spell, and we will end up where I want us to be. Within a blink of an eye, we leave our home in the Nether After heading up to the ruins of Hong Kong. I don't even need a photograph to etheric transfer. I can easily remember the burnt clock tower. I listen to Carol ooh and ah as the world whirls past the two of us. We're left standing in front of the burnt-down building in the

human world.

“What a rush. You can feel all your power rippling over the two of us. It’s unbelievable. Can we do it again, Faust? Huh? Huh?”

“We’ll do it again when it’s time to go home,” I whisper. I eye the lanterns in her hand, uneasy. The sensations of wet cobwebs are still clinging to my face and clothes. I resist the urge to brush at myself. Instead, I take the flowers from Carol’s hand and lay them in front of the building. This might not be Mom’s grave. This is the grave I want Carol to remember. She looks at the building with big wide eyes.

“Wow, why do you think it burned down? Do you think Mom did it? Dad says she was an amazing necromancer. She was a real hell raiser too.”



My jaw drops open. My father has never talked about Mom with me. It’s a bit of a shock he’s mentioned her to Carol. I start stuttering like crazy.

“What... what makes you think mom burned it down?”

Carol rolls her eyes at me. I’ve already figured out you’re involved in this somehow, but it doesn’t matter. You don’t need to say anything.”

My sister grabs the incense and lays them down next to the flowers. She lit the incense with a shide. I’m amazed she mastered fire necromancy so quickly. With two puffs of smoke, the incense starts burning. The sweet smell of jasmine and honeysuckle fills the air.

“It was nice of Ms.Wang to give us these.”

I mumble a grunt and take the candles, and lay them down on the clock tower stone stairs. I light them like Carol and watch the flickering flame dance close to the large bouquet.

“No more pouting, ok. You, me, and Mom, we can have lunch together. Then you are going to fill out this lantern. We’ll float them down the river so they can reach the Sanzu.”

“Why do I need to do that?” I ask Carol confused.

“So you can tell Mom what your feeling and how you are. If her ghost is free somewhere, she can read it and return to the Nether After.”

That did it. I can’t hold my emotions back any longer. My eyes start watering up. I don’t want to cry in front of Carol. I feel so guilty, though.

My sister thinks my mother is some ghost that needs to be spirited back home, but charon don’t make ghosts. We’re not human. Mom is dead, and she’s never coming back.

“Don’t cry Faust. We can come whenever we want now that you’ve memorized the location. It’s ok.”

Before I can say another word, my little sister slams me to the ground with a huge bear hug.

“Don’t be so upset. We’ll be all right even without Mom. We have each other. She didn’t leave us alone, and now we can visit. This is going to be our spot. You got that.”

“Yeah, I got it.” I nod my head feeling a large lump in my

throat.

“...And you, you are going to eat something today. You better not dare tell me you’re not hungry. Mrs. Wang went through a lot of trouble to make this lunch, and were going to eat every bite.”

Carol rips our picnic basket up from the ground and sets up lunch. I don’t know when she became this grown-up. It’s both confusing and comforting at the same time. I start to wallow in my thoughts. Breathing in the charcoal remains of the building. I am trying to find recognizable cogs of the tower. Nothing here is identifiable. When Carol notices, I’m not paying attention. She digs her little fingers into my shoulder, pinching my arm.

“Now, have some pork buns.”

I shove a pork bun in my mouth to appease the little harpy. I’m surprised at how good it tastes. She’s right, but I don’t know what to say to her. Instead, I knock back some of the soup dumplings she offers me. I start eating like a man who’s never been fed before.

“You may think no one understands you. We have Mrs. Wang and the spirits. You’ve got me, and believe it or not, you have Dad and big sis too. We’re never alone, Faust. Because of that, we’re both going to be ok.”

I nod at Carol, gulping down about five little soup dumplings at once. The warm broth rolls down my throat. I can’t ever remember having a meal that tastes this good before. I keep my eyes on my food so she can’t see the tears rolling down my face. For some reason, I can’t stop crying. When Carol gives me the marker and the lantern, I stare at it like it’s a snake. I don’t want to touch it.

“Come on. You need to write it all down. Tell Mom how you feel... How do you really feel? No reason to hide anything because no one will look at it.”

For a second, Carol’s voice almost sounds like Mom’s. It’s enough to convince me to take the marker from her and scribble down a few thoughts on the paper lantern. Before long, I’ve covered all four sides of the lantern with everything from goodbyes to angry swearing. My little sister doesn’t try to read them. She adds a few

more sentences to her own lantern. I can't help but notice that her concerned expression has disappeared instead, she looks at the lantern hatefully as she pens her last words. Part of me wants to know what she's written. She respected my privacy. I know I should respect hers. We quietly walk to the ocean hand in hand and set both the paper lanterns afloat. The waves start pulling them away, and after a while, they are only two orange dots on the horizon. I strain my eyes to see them. Carol is crying now. I want to say something to her but don't know what to say. Instead, I pick her up and hug her to my body.



“How about I show you how to do the Etheric Transfer spell.”

“Really? Are you sure you feel like it? You’ve been hiding out in

your room for days.”

“Yeah, someone has to teach you necromancy.”

“I guess so,” Carol says sheepishly, trying to muster a smile.

I give her a crooked smile and start collecting our things. As I turn around to pick up the discarded marker we used on the lanterns, I see something moving in the bushes.

A pair of dark blank eyes are watching us. I reach out with my necromancy, trying to touch it, but the creature feels empty inside. The hulking beast pulls the foilage away from itself. I can see it, and it can see me.

It makes no movement toward Carol and me. Instead, it slowly backs away from us and takes off with a full run into the forest.

Big Po is still out there, and with my sister clinging to my leg shaking, I can’t chase him.

“What was that Faust? It looked like a monster.”

“Who knows, maybe it’s Bigfoot,” I lie.

I can tell by Carol’s expression that she isn’t convinced, maybe because she can easily see the railroad spike gripped in my fist.

“I think we should go home. Better leave stuff like this to the Leiche Guard.”

Carol nods at me obediently. We rush to collect our belongings. With a whirl of necrotic magic, we disappear into the ether.

Even with our quick transfer home, I can still see the monster’s hungry blank eyes in my mind. Wishing it could eat me and my sister.



Eventually, things will get back to normal. Maybe by helping spooks and training Carol, I'll recover that little piece of myself that Mom ripped away.

All I can do now is wait for that one morning I wake up and don't hurt anymore. Until then, I will turn all my attention to the ghosts who still need my help. I'm going to start with hunting down Big Po.



The End

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *The Nether After*. Independent authors who are starting out desperately need reviews to help us improve and to be discovered by new readers, so please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads! Head on over to www.jodilcox.com to reach me directly and to subscribe for series news and updates.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi Cox is an American dieselpunk author born on April 10, 1979, in Union City, Indiana. She graduated from Simon Kenton High School in 1997. Later she went on to graduate with a BFA from the College of Mount Saint Joseph, now known as the University of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, Ohio.

After college, Jodi started writing for Citybeat magazine. Later she went on to become a pioneer in internet graphics and website development. After spending nearly ten years writing for everything from tax websites to poetry, Jodi began developing the world of the Nether After, unbeknown to her that steampunk and dieselpunk was turning into a literary genre.

Jodi enjoys all things speculative fiction but has a penchant for the weird and unusual. She describes herself as a comic book snob. She is often found with a stack of Japanese and American graphic novels in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. She enjoys drawing and painting, as well as writing. Her hours not spent on writing are devoted to geeking out over new computer hardware, or the latest video games. She loves ripping into electronics to see how they work, as well as cooking and developing new recipes.

As a writer, Jodi has been writing steampunk, dieselpunk, and fantasy of all types. She has even dipped her toe into science fiction.

